

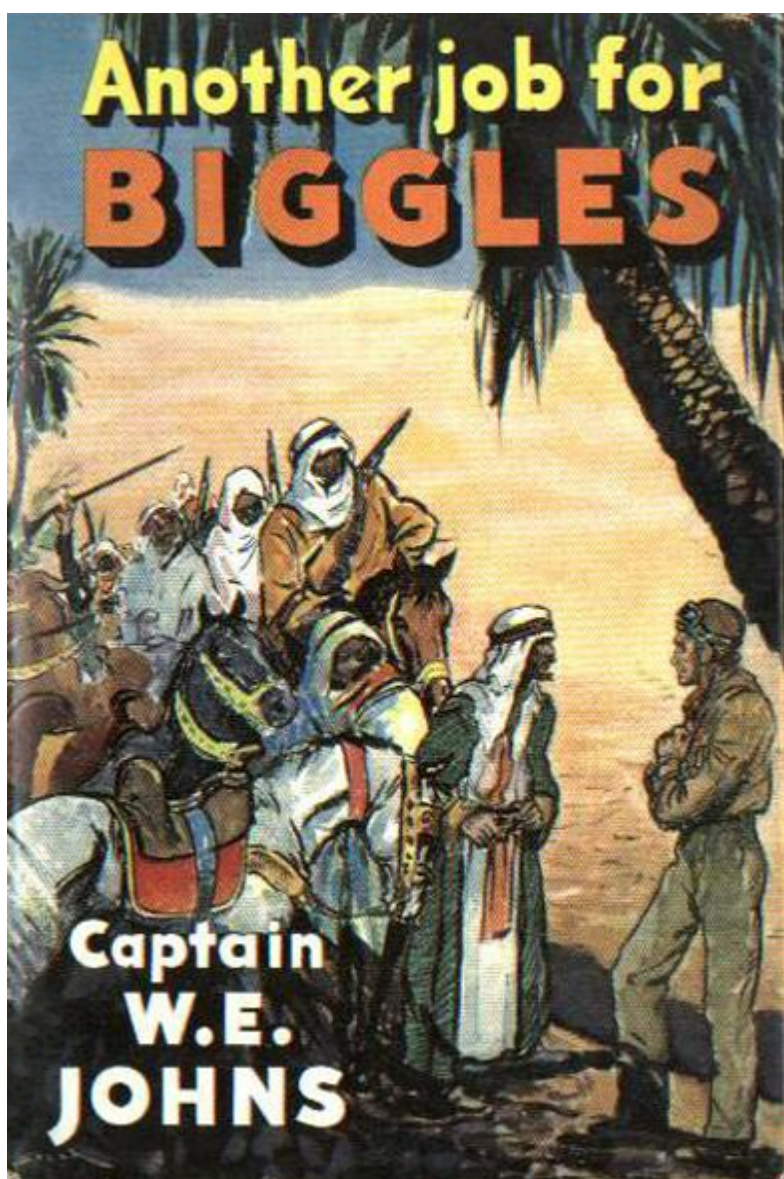
Another job for **BIGGLES**



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ANOTHER JOB FOR BIGGLES

by
CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS



Illustrated by Stead

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Chapter 1

Conference at the Yard

"COME in, Bigglesworth. Sit down."

The speaker was Air Commodore Raymond, administrative head of the Special Air Section, New Scotland Yard: and the man to whom he spoke was Sergeant Bigglesworth (known to his friends as Biggles) his chief pilot, who had just entered the room.

"I've some news for you," informed the Air Commodore, a curious smile hovering about the corners of his mouth.

"Go ahead, Sir," invited Biggles sombrely. "I can take it."

"For your pains you've been promoted."

Biggles started. "I've been what!"

"Promoted."

"To what?"

"Detective Air-Inspector, which, incidentally, is a new rank at the Yard."

Biggles stared. "Suffering Icarus! " he breathed. "That's terrific. When Bertie learns this he'll swallow his monocle. May I ask who did this to me?"

"The Commissioner himself—no less."

"Don't think me ungrateful, Sir, but it would have been better to stick to plain Sarge; it isn't such a mouthful," said Biggles sadly. "Do I have to do anything extra for this spot of elevation? Too much responsibility has already washed out the sense of humour that once enabled me to aviate with a light heart."

"Not necessarily," replied the Air Commodore smiling. "Are you still very busy?"

"I think I've about got things buttoned up," answered Biggles.

This conversation related to the work on which he had for some weeks been employed. The Treasury, agreeing reluctantly that the police force would have to move with the times, had at last sanctioned a grant of money for the formation and equipment of a Special Air Unit, whereas hitherto the Air Police had had to rely on the Air Ministry for its machines, maintenance and service. The money did not run to a special airfield, but it was sufficient for the hire of a private hangar at Gatwick Airport, with the usual offices, and one or two aircraft for general work, mostly types from the R.A.F Obsolescent List. It was, of course, out of the question for the Unit to maintain the many types, large and small, land, marine or amphibious, which its highly specialised work in different parts of the world might from time to time demand; but the difficulty had been overcome by the appointment at the Air Ministry of a Liaison Officer who was authorised to let the Police have on loan any particular type required.

It was on the organisation of this Unit that Biggles had been working; and there had been a lot to do, from the engagement of mechanics, who had been enrolled as policemen, to the fitting of two-way high-frequency radio, for direct communication between pilots and their headquarters, and police cars on the ground.

"I've got my old flight-sergeant, Smyth, in charge of the ground-staff,"

Biggles told the Air Commodore. "There'll be a twenty-four hour service in the radio room. So through it, you should be able to get in touch with us instantly, whether we're in the air or on the carpet. I hope, too, always to have an officer on duty, with an aircraft standing by, for any urgent job that may turn up."

The Air Commodore nodded. "Good! We're getting on. I'm arranging for a special code for you, so that I shall be able to speak to you, or with your ground-staff, without the rest of the world listening to our conversation."

That should be useful," agreed Biggles. "There's just one thing though. I hope the Commissioner doesn't get any funny ideas, on account of this new set up, of turning us on to routine jobs. The day I'm put on

traffic-control over Epsom Downs on Derby Day my resignation will be on your desk. I can find something more entertaining than counting queues of cars on cross-roads."

The Air Commodore laughed. "I don't think it'll come to that. We've already got that angle covered." He picked up a single loose cigarette that lay on his desk and offered it. "Have a cigarette to steady your nerves?"

Biggles looked at the cigarette frowned and then lifted his eyes to the Air Commodore's face. "What's wrong with it?" he queried suspiciously.

"What makes you think there's anything wrong with it?"

"Because when one has a box at one's elbow it isn't usual to offer a visitor a second-hand sample," answered Biggles.

The Air Commodore laughed again. "True enough," he agreed. "You're living up to your new title."

Biggles took the cigarette, examined it closely, smelt it and handed it back. "Looks all right, except that it doesn't carry the maker's name,"

he observed. "Did you really want me to smoke it?"

"No. You might enjoy it but it wouldn't be good for you."

"What would it do to me?"

The Air Commodore put his fingers together and

gazed at the ceiling. "After a few draws you would sink back in a peace that passes the understanding. Wonderful music, melodious beyond imagination, would caress your ears as you wandered in an

exquisite dream-world. You would then become a giant, floating on clouds to a world where pain is unknown and life an eternal harmony of joy."

Biggles sighed. "That's just what I've been looking for all my life. May I have a thousand?"

"Unfortunately I've only got one."

"Who handed you that paradise story?"

"A man who has smoked one of the cigarettes."

"Dope, eh?"

"Sort of."

"Sounds fascinating."

The Air Commodore nodded slowly. "It may sound fascinating, but I didn't send for you merely to excite your imagination. I sent for you because we're up against a menace that might, if it is allowed to run wild, turn the world upside down. I'm hoping you may be able to make a helpful suggestion."

"Do you mean this is a flying job?"

The Air Commodore hesitated. "I don't know. It may be. I can't make up my mind just what sort of job it is, and that's a fact. It may be in your line, or it may not. I'll tell you about it, then you tell me."

"Do you mind if I get my boys down?" requested Biggles. "It may save me from going over the story again for their benefit. If this case is to be handed to us I'd like them to get the facts from the start. As a matter of detail, Algy Lacey is away. I've given him a week's leave, and he's gone sailing somewhere on somebody's yacht."

"I see." The Air Commodore reached for his intercom telephone. "Please ask Air Constables Lissie and Hebblethwaite to come to my office," he told the operator.

A minute later they came into the room, and after Raymond had told them to be seated, he went on:

"I've just been having a word with Detective Air Inspector Bigglesworth and he thought you ought to be here to listen to the rest of the conversation."

There was a short silence. Then, in a thin voice, Ginger asked: "Who did you say?"

"Ah! Of course, you didn't know about your Sergeant's promotion," murmured the Air Commodore.

"Promotion! Jolly good," burst out Bertie. "I say, you know, not before it was due, if you don't mind my saying so." He walked over to Biggles and held out his hand. "Jolly good show old boy—absolutely top hole.

Congrats and all that."

Biggles smiled as he shook hands with Bertie and Ginger in turn.

"Thanks," he said.

"All right. Now that's over let's get on," resumed the Air Commodore, pushing the cigarette box forward. "I was just saying, we've a rather nasty job on hand, and it's a bit difficult to know where to start. I take it you've all heard of marijuana?"

Biggles answered. "I have, although I've never made actual contact with it."

The Air Commodore went on. "To botanists, marijuana is merely a plant indigenous to Central

America. To every police force in the world it has for years been a headache. Prepared, it becomes a drug that has startling effects on the human system, one of which is to make the user utterly fearless and regardless of consequences. American gunmen used it in the days of gang warfare. They admitted that under its influence they could commit murder cheerfully. A little of it got over here in spite of our efforts to prevent it. It is taken in the form of smoke, in cigarettes, which sell at a price that shows a fantastic profit. I merely mention this in passing in order to point out that we are not without experience in this sort of thing. Fortunately, it's fairly easy to spot a man under the influence of the stuff, so we've been able to keep the racket under reasonable control; but make no mistake; if marijuana ever got into common use civilisation as we know it would just fall to pieces."

"Was it marijuana in the gasper you offered me just now?" enquired Biggles.

"No. The stuff in that cigarette is a hundred times more insidious."

Biggles made a grimace. "I begin to understand why you're worried."

The Air Commodore nodded. "I thought you would. All right. I shall now have to switch the conversation to a different angle, and a different locality. Some time ago, Doctor Guthram Darnley, the celebrated Asiatic traveller and explorer, undertook to cross the least known territory left on earth. This is not, as some people might suppose, the North Pole or the Amazonian jungle, but the very cradle of the human race, namely, Arabia—or to be more specific,

the Rub al Khali*, which is that part of the great Arabian Peninsula lying between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. This is the real desert, a wilderness of calcined earth and sand. Water-holes are few and far between; they are guarded jealously by fanatical tribesmen that fight among themselves, so you can imagine what sort of reception an infidel would get.

For this reason only one or two white men have seen the country—or at any rate, the southern area, which Darnley proposed to cross. Having lived for many years on the outskirts, and being able to speak Arabic

* Rub al Khali is Arabic, meaning, literally, Empty Quarter, an appropriate name because most of it, occupying many thousands of square miles, is a waterless desert of sand dunes. These "great sands" are bounded by mountain and steppe country which is almost as inhospitable, although a few scattered water holes and harsh scrub are sufficient to support one or two nomadic Arab tribes that are normally at war with each other. A British zone of influence has been established by aircraft of the R.A.F. operating from Aden, and a few advanced landing-grounds.

fluently, he had the advantage of being able to pass himself off as an Arab."

"I've seen a little of this country from the air," put in Biggles.

"So have several other pilots," acknowledged the Air Commodore. "But what did you see? Sand. What did you learn? Nothing. You must agree that air survey has a very limited scope. An air pilot may observe the nature of the terrain, but he returns without any knowledge whatever of the things that dwell on it, human, animal or vegetable. In short, he brings back no scientific information, and is in fact unable to add one single name to the map. In order to acquire this knowledge a man must still travel as his early ancestors travelled—on foot. Very well. Doctor Darnley, a man with great experience of desert travel, made his hazardous journey on foot—or, to be more precise, on the back of a camel. Naturally, he did not go alone. He had a fairly considerable force of Arab camel-men with him, enough to carry his water and stores, and present a bold front to raiding tribesmen. Most of these men were changed several times during the journey as camels became worn out and areas dominated by different races of Arabs were crossed. I mention this because, in view of what is coming, it is important." The Air Commodore pushed the cigarette box to Biggles and at the same time helped himself.

"We needn't dwell on the Doctor's adventures," he continued. "At the moment we are interested only in one of his several discoveries. He found great areas of sand, but there are also wide stretches of flat, hard earth, and gravel, locally called sabka, which are sterile simply because there is practically no water. These regions are sometimes split by wadis, which are valleys in which a little brackish water may be found—

not enough to support life as we know it but enough for the needs of small groups of tribesmen who never in their entire lives know what it is to drink to repletion. As one hole dries up they move to another.

"In one such wadi Doctor Damley found what might be truly called a lost tribe of Arabs. Actually, they were Murras, and in his opinion had once been a powerful raiding party. At the time of his arrival there were about thirty survivors, all men, and they were in a pitiable condition.

His first impression was that they were all suffering from sleepy sickness; but then, realising that such a disease in such a place was out of the question, his curiosity led him to make enquiries. He discovered that their comatose' condition was brought about by the smoke of their fires. As you know, dry camel dung is the normal fuel in the desert, although sticks are used if they can be found. It happened that in this wadi there grew a shrub that burnt freely. There was also some acacia, which actually was the cause of the trouble in the first place, because it provides fodder for camels. The Arabs, finding both water and fodder, stayed on, as is the Arab custom, to make the most of it. For their fires they used the other shrub to which I referred just now.' The smoke, they discovered, induced very pleasant sensations, and they also stayed on to enjoy it. They must have been in ignorance of what they were doing because all drugs, and alcohol for that matter, are forbidden by their religion—although that doesn't prevent them from selling it to other people.

"Their trouble was they stayed too long, for when the time came to go, they lacked the strength to travel. What was worse, their camels had been eating the shrub and were in an even worse condition than the men. In such a country a man, even an Arab, without his camel, is finished. So these wretched Murras found themselves marooned, so to speak. And there they were when Doctor Damley arrived. They were then living by eating their useless camels. The Doctor could do nothing for them, for the position of his own party was precarious."

The Air Commodore smiled apologetically. "I shall now, I fear, have to bore you with a little botany. I've looked it up myself to save you the trouble."

Biggles nodded. "Botany isn't in my line, but go ahead," he invited.

"On examining the shrub that had caused the mischief, a woody plant about three feet high with a

greyish leaf, the Doctor found that it was new to him. This was not really remarkable because Arabia seems to have made a point of developing highly specialised plants—and beasts for that matter—that will flourish only when given certain conditions of soil, climate and altitude. A precise degree of all these things may be essential to the well-being of the plant. Frankincense is an example and even in Southern Arabia it is very local. Thus with this new shrub, which, I may say, was also unknown to the Doctor's Arabs. As you may or may not know, nearly every plant that grows in a waterless district must by some means protect itself from excessive evaporation, otherwise it will be shrivelled up by the blazing sun. They must contain and conserve their own water supply. Some turn their leaves edge on to the sun. Others, like cacti, grow extremely thick leaves, so that each one is a sort of reservoir. Others coat themselves with gum, which, acting as a varnish, prevents their moisture from escaping. The shrub with which we are concerned comes into this category, and to make a long story short, the Doctor ascertained that this gum was a potent narcotic.

"Doctor Darnley collected some seeds of this plant, brought them home and gave them to the Royal Horticultural Society for scientific investigation. A few plants were raised at Kew in artificial conditions approaching as nearly as possible those of the wadi; but apparently conditions were not identical and the plants died, so that today not one exists in cultivation. But before they died they served their purpose.

The shrub was identified as a new form of *Artemesia*. For a desert species the plant grows quickly from seed and bears gum in a few months. In passing I may say that many of the *Artemesia* family have

toxic properties. One is commonly known as wormwood, and the French use it to make a rather deadly drink called absinthe. Anyhow, that's the story of how the new drug came to the notice of civilisation. The natives call it gurra, which is perhaps easier to remember." The Air Commodore stubbed his cigarette.

"Realising the dangerous nature of this drug we saw to it that it was given no publicity. Some of the gum was sent to the medical people for examination as to possible medicinal qualities, and from them we know the effect it has on human beings when inhaled in the form of smoke. We will now come back to London."

Chapter 2

An Assignment in Arabia!

"THE first indication that we had that this new dope was no longer a secret was when a lady in the West End of London rang up her doctor in a panic to say that her husband appeared to be dying," continued the Air Commodore. "Actually, he was not. He was under the influence of a drug.

An unfinished cigarette lying beside him was sent for analysis and turned out to contain gurra. Very soon other cases were coming to our notice. In a raid on a night club the police found two men and a woman under the same influence. From this it became clear that a regular traffic was going on in the underworld. A number of people were already addicts of the drug which was being sold in the form of cigarettes. This was bad enough but worse was to come. In the early hours one morning a police officer picked up a man unconscious in the street. Thinking he was drunk the officer got him to a police station. He wasn't drunk. He'd been doped—with gurra. He had also been robbed. He had no idea as to how he had got into such a condition. He stated that he found himself in conversation, in an hotel, with a man, a stranger, who had offered him a cigarette. He remembered nothing afterwards. It was a thing anyone might do. Other people have had the same nasty experience. You'll now see our difficulty. We can't issue notices

warning people against accepting cigarettes from strangers without revealing the whole story, which might do more harm than good. No doubt there are people already addicted to the stuff about whom we know nothing, people who enjoy—if I can use the word—the drug in their own homes. We are told that the sensations produced are similar to those of opium, only more intense. Well, that's the position, and if you will let your imagination dwell on it, you'll see what's likely to happen if the stuff gets into general use. At the moment it's being used in two ways.

One, simply as a drug, like opium, cocaine or hashish, by people who are crazy enough to go in for that form of enjoyment. Two, by crooks who are able to stupefy a selected victim by merely offering him a cigarette. The cigarette I have here was obtained by one of our plain-clothes men posing as a millionaire in a London night club. The fellow who offered it was arrested. He protested complete ignorance as to the nature of the cigarette, asserting that it must have been in a packet which he had just bought. We had no case against him and we had to let him go. To have put him in court would merely have given the stuff undesirable publicity, and warned the vendors of it that we knew what was going on. It's no earthly use arresting these odd men selling the stuff. They're only the small fry. Others would soon take their places. We've got to get, literally, to the root of the thing. By which I mean we've not only got to find the man or the syndicate that is smuggling the stuff into the country; we've got to find out where he's getting it from. The stuff is so strong that only a

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minute quantity would be required to treat thousands of cigarettes, and I doubt if the Excise officers could prevent its importation. So really, the only way to kill the racket is to destroy the stuff at its source. Of course, it would be something if we could lay our hands on the big man behind the graft. That he is a big man we may be sure, for his profits must have been enormous. You see, what is going on here, is also going on in America and on the Continent. In fact, it's the most serious menace we've ever had to face, and I'm not exaggerating when I say that if it got a big hold it might well put western civilisation off the map. As you know, it's no use asking people to refrain from using a drug once they're in its grip. They're physically unable to do so."

"In what form is this stuff put into cigarettes?" inquired Biggles.

"It seems that a small quantity of tobacco is steeped in alcohol in which the gum has been dissolved. This is then dried, mixed with ordinary tobacco and made up into cigarettes."

"Has it any taste?"

"It gives a cigarette a slight aromatic flavour, hardly noticeable and rather pleasant than otherwise. We reckon that one grain would be sufficient to treat a hundred cigarettes."

"What about the tobacco used? I mean, what sort of leaf is it ?—

Virginian? Turkish? Egyptian? Empire? or what?"

" That line of investigation will get you nowhere," asserted the Air Commodore sadly. "We've tried it. All types are used. Indeed, there is reason to believe

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that the dope pedlars get their tobacco by breaking up popular brands of cigarettes. The contents of one ordinary cigarette, doped, could be mixed with the contents of hundreds of others; and even then a few draws would be sufficient to rob the smoker of his normal faculties."

"Hm." Biggles thought for a moment. "If it is a fact that gurra occurs only in one place, in Arabia, it shouldn't be a difficult matter to cut off the supply of gum at its source."

The Air Commodore nodded. " Just so. That's where I thought you might come in."

"You mean—we might fly out and destroy the whole growth? "

"Yes. It burns readily."

" How much is there?"

"According to the Doctor perhaps three acres, sometimes sparse and sometimes thick." The Air Commodore looked at Biggles seriously. "Don't get the idea that the destruction of the stuff in its original habitat is going to be a simple matter. There are several factors to consider, each one not pretty to look at. First, there's the country itself. If anything went wrong, you'd have no hope of getting out alive, not even if you took as much water as you could carry. A white man couldn't live in that furnace without special preparations. Then again, fresh Arabs may have arrived there, and if you fall into their hands they would certainly kill you."

Bertie stepped into the conversation. "How about dropping a few incendiaries into the beastly stuff—if you see what I mean? No need to land at all that I can see."

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"There's a snag about that," the Air Commodore pointed out. "What about the Arabs already there? They may still be alive. They're practically helpless, or they were when Doctor Darnley was on the spot, and you'd burn them up too. That isn't to be contemplated, and the fact that they're likely to die anyway makes no difference. The effect of such an act, if it became known, would send the whole Arab world up in arms."

"I didn't think of that," murmured Bertie. Biggles resumed. "What I can't understand is how the stuff came to be commercialised in the first place."

Was Doctor Darnley the only white man in his expedition?"

"He was."

"Somebody must have talked. The Doctor can be ruled out, so it must have been one of his Arabs."

"So it would seem. But the Doctor assures me that he told his men nothing about the stuff, fearing they might start playing with it and

put them all in the same fix as the miserable people already there."

"All the same, unless we are to suppose that gurra was discovered in two places almost simultaneously, which isn't likely, some member of his party must have been more wide-awake than the Doctor supposed. I am assuming that this wadi is beyond the normal range of coastal Arabs, or a casual white traveller."

"Quite correct," concurred the Air Commodore. "Certainly no white man had ever seen the wadi, or been within a hundred miles of it. And as far as the Arabs were concerned the Doctor had with him only three men who had ever made contact with outside

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civilisation. The coastal Arabs who started with him refused absolutely to go beyond the country that they knew and that ended far short of the wadi. That was why, as I told you, the Doctor had to change his camel men from time to time. No tribe dared go beyond its normal boundary, although it might happen occasionally in a raid."

"Did these three coastal Arabs stay with the Doctor throughout the trip?"

"Yes. He picked them up at Aden. They had been with him on a previous expedition."

"One of these men must have spotted more than the Doctor imagined,"

declared Biggles. "He might have discovered the gum on his own account and put some in his bag to enjoy when he got home. Later, he might have talked about it. I know this is surmise, but I can't imagine a simple camel man having the wit to realise the possibilities of the stuff outside his own amusement."

The Air Commodore rubbed his chin. "Anyway, the racket is now organised on such a scale that we can assume that behind it is no ordinary, small-time dope pedlar."

"I take it that Doctor Darnley can supply the exact position of the wadi in which the plant grows?"

" Oh yes. You may be sure I had a long talk with him. He is very upset because he feels that he is largely responsible for what has happened.

But, as he pointed out, we've no proof positive that the plant doesn't grow somewhere else. If it does, no doubt it demands exactly the same conditions—a sandy soil, practically no water, and a baking summer heat.

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But there, one feels that if the plant did grow somewhere else, in upper Egypt, the Sudan, or Abyssinia, for instance, the natives would have discovered the dope long ago, in which case it would certainly have been brought to our notice. All the same, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that certain aromatic trees and shrubs found in Arabia, such as frankincense, myrrh, balm of Gilead, and so on, are also to be found on the other side of the Red Sea; but they are not generally of good quality, which suggests that they were transplanted there in the first place."

Biggles lit another cigarette. "Assuming that the Dope King got his gurra from the wadi, how did he get the stuff home? Did he harvest a crop, so to speak, and bring it home like a load of hay? "

" I shouldn't think so," returned Raymond. "That wouldn't be necessary.

He'd only need the gum, and that could have been brought home in one small bag."

"Could he get the gum without the plant?" inquired Biggles. " I'm a bit out of my depth in this sort of thing."

"I imagine he'd employ one of the primitive, but still quite effective, methods of collecting the gum," explained the Air Commodore. "Gum-collecting has been an industry in the Middle East for thousands of

years—not gurra, though, as far as we know. But many other shrubs yield aromatic gum which is used mostly in perfume making—opoponax, for instance which is the base of many perfumes. If the plant is large enough, as in the case of frankincense, an incision is made in the bark, and the tears of rosin—as they

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call them—drip from the cut. With smaller plants, one way is to drive goats through the stuff, when the gum sticks to their beards. A more modern way is to use a kind of rake with a double row of leather straps.

This is pulled through the shrubs and the gum sticks to the straps."

"Very interesting," murmured Biggles. "And you think that if the stuff could be destroyed in its natural home, the supply of gurra would dry up?"

"It's a reasonable assumption," averred the Air Commodore. "But that presupposes the supply is coming from the wadi. That, in turn, means that someone has agents there collecting it. If so, they wouldn't be likely to let you destroy it without putting up a stiff opposition."

"Naturally," said Biggles slowly. "But we could at least try it. We should certainly learn something. Did you by any chance ask the Doctor if an aircraft could get down anywhere near this place? "

"I did, and he assured me that a landing could be made practically anywhere. The whole country, disregarding two or three wadis, is mostly a flat area of wind—polished gravel, at an altitude of about eight hundred and fifty feet. There happens to be a conspicuous landmark too. Between fifteen and twenty miles to the north there is a mountain system in the form of a horseshoe, with its ends pointing to the southwest. If you follow the westerly end and continue for about ten miles, you will come to the Wadi al Arwat, which is the Arab name for the wadi in which we are interested."

Biggles smiled. "I see you have all the gen handy."

"I was hoping' you'd go," confessed the Air Commadore, "although in view of the nature of the thing, I had no intention of sending you if you thought it too risky. You realise that a crack-up, even if you didn't hurt yourself, would end your career in a way that I for one would deplore."

"I could minimise that risk by taking two machines, each capable of seating two or ,three passengers," suggested Biggles. "Only one machine would land. The other would stay in the air as a relief in case of accidents."

"That's an idea," agreed the Air Commadore.

"But I want you to realise that there is no more dangerous territory in the world for a white man. Thirst and hostile Arabs are factors not to be treated lightly."

"So I have discovered," murmured Biggles drily.

"Just two more questions," he went on. "I imagine the nearest aerodrome to the wadi is Aden?"

"Yes, but the Aden Conimand has some outlying emergency landing grounds, although they don't extend far back from the coast. You would probably find it most convenient to operate from Aden."

"And how far, roughly, is Aden from the wadi? "

"As a plane flies, not more than a hundred and fifty miles, although by camel, avoiding dunes and wadis, and travelling from water—hole to water—

hole, it would be more than twice that distance and take at least six weeks to cover."

"I see. Did you by any chance get the names of these three coastal

Arabs who went all the way with Doctor Darnley?"

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"Yes, I have them here." The Air Commodore picked up a slip of paper.

"The most intelligent, his general organiser and interpreter on several expeditions, was Abu bin Hamud. The other two were known as Kuatim and Zahar. All three speak English, more or less. Are you thinking of calling on them? If you are, I can get you photographs of them, and the wadi.

Darnley brought back a big collection of pictures."

"I'd like to see them," said Biggles. "It struck me that as I shall be in Aden, if that's their home town when they're not employed, I might have a word with them. If someone has been to the Wadi al Arwat since the Doctor was there, they may have accompanied the expedition. If they didn't go themselves they may have heard rumours. You know how news travels in such places. Which reminds me; I may need a local contact man myself."

"I can help you there," offered the Air Commodore.

"A retired Middle East Political Officer, named Captain Jerry Norman, has made his home in Aden. He speaks all the dialects. He's a good type.

Every-

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one knows him. If you want advice about anything or anybody you couldn't do better than go to Jerry."

"Thanks," acknowledged Biggles. "But if there are no complications we ought to finish the job and be home in a week to ten days. All you want me to do is to burn these poison plants? "

"Unless, of course, you can lay your hands on the man who is making a fortune out of the stuff."

Biggles got up. "That's a taller order but I'll see what can be done about it," he promised. "If that's all for the moment I'll start making arrangements. The sooner the job's done the better."

"What about Lacey ? Are you going to recall him from leave?"

Biggles hesitated. "I don't think that's necessary. Three of us ought to be able to manage. You can tell him where we are and what we're doing when he comes back." Biggles broke off and laughed suddenly.

"What's the joke?" inquired the Air Commodore suspiciously.

"I was just wondering what things are coming to, when it becomes necessary to send a policeman over two thousand miles to light a bonfire," explained Biggles.

"Where the Middle East is concerned, a little fire often makes a big blaze before it's put out," reminded the Air Commodore earnestly. "Be careful how you strike your matches."

"I'll keep an extinguisher handy," promised Biggles, as, followed by Bertie and Ginger, he left the room.

Chapter 3

A Riddle In The Sands

FIVE days later, two four-seat Proctor aircraft, single-engined, low-wing cabin monoplanes, on loan from Air Ministry Communication Headquarters, but without service insignia, stood ticking over on the sun-scorched aerodrome at Aden, where Biggles and his party had arrived overnight after an uneventful trip out along the regular air route. Near the machines, in casual conversation but in attitudes that suggested they were waiting for someone—which in fact they were—

stood Ginger and Bertie, clad in tropical kit.

"Here he comes now," observed Ginger, as Biggles appeared, walking briskly from the direction of the administrative buildings.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, but I've been busy," apologised Biggles, as he joined the others. "I thought it would be easy to find these three Arabs of Doctor Darnley's, but there's nothing doing. Apparently no one has seen them for a long time. Abu bin Hamud put in a brief appearance some months

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ago but the other two seem to have completely disappeared. Their camels have gone, so it's supposed they're out on another expedition—either that, or they've got a job transporting dates to the coast. I dashed along to see Jerry Norman, the chap the Air Commodore told us about, thinking he might be able to help. I found him at the Club. Nice, amiable chap." Biggles smiled. "That's why I'm late. He knows the three men because it was he who engaged them when he was helping Darnley to organise his show; but he has no idea of where they are now. However, he's promised to make enquiries while we're away. Of course, we may not need these men; on the other hand, they might be able to tell us something. All right. Let's get off this blistering dirt-track. You know the plan. I shall land with Ginger and set fire to the stuff. You, Bertie, will circle and keep an eye on us unless I signal you to come down. We'll get the job done as fast as we can. Let's get off."

In a few minutes both machines were in the air, climbing for altitude on a course that was roughly north-east.

Ginger, who had had experience of desert flying, did not expect to enjoy the trip. Nor did he. The sun beat down with relentless force and a blinding glare made him glad that he'd brought dark goggles. At first, the territory below was more or less under cultivation, but this soon gave way to wide areas of wilderness, with the herbage round water-holes and groups of palms standing like islands in the surrounding desolation.

These became fewer, until at last the

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scene became a colourless expanse of naked earth, sterile except for an occasional growth of camel-thorn or acacia. In half an hour, to the north, a long glittering yellow line marked the southern extremity of the Great Sands. Above it the overheated air flowed in a quivering, transparent stream. Overhead, a sky of steely blue was reflected in every depression on the ground, so that a hollow sometimes appeared as a lake of pale blue shadows. One looked in vain for a touch of green.

As time passed the terrain became ever more hopeless in its awful loneliness and barren desolation, and Ginger found himself admiring the courage of Docctor Darnley and those few white men who had faced its blazing challenge. For the most part the ground appeared to be flat or slightly undulating, with weird, distorted shadows, marking the configuration of the large dunes. All was as lifeless as the moon. Still, Ginger was in no way disappointed or surprised. What he could see was what he had expected to see. He had seen deserts before, and most deserts are alike in their weary monotony. He was only thankful they were covering this one the easy way.

The machine roared on, thrusting the thin, sun-drenched air behind it, often bumping unpleasantly as it encountered up-currents and 'sinkers' caused by the convulsions of sun-lashed air and sand.

Fifty yards to the left, Bertie in the reserve machine drove a similar uneasy course.

It seemed a long time, although actually it was less than two hours, before Biggles touched Ginger on the knee and pointed ahead, slightly to the north. Ginger

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knew what he meant. Thrust up for perhaps a thousand feet from the sand was a curving system of hills that could, with a little imagination, be likened to the shape of a horse-shoe.

Biggles took the machine straight to the far end of this conspicuous landmark, and then, turning, followed it southward until it broke down in a more or less flat plain that stretched east and west as far as the eye could see. Roughly in the middle, running southward towards the distant Arabian Sea, was a dried-up water-course, a little gash in the earth, which Ginger knew—as there were no others in sight—could only be the Wadi al Arwat, their objective.

Although still some way off he surveyed the place with interest and curiosity, particularly as it bore little resemblance to the sort of feature he had visualised. The foliage of the narcotic shrub had been described as grey; but he could see nothing that answered to this description. Indeed, from the air at any rate, any herbage the wadi supported—and there seemed to be very little—could only be described as dirty brown, if not actually black. Of the Arab refugees, if they were still there, he could see nothing. At all events, nothing moved, although there was a certain amount of debris scattered about that might have been anything.

He looked at Biggles, who was also staring down, having dropped his port wing for a better view. Biggles returned the glance and remarked:

"Queer." Looking down again he went on: "I don't get it. I don't see much in the way of scrub growing there. Nor can I see anything that looks like a water-hole.

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I can't imagine what that dark-coloured stuff could be. No matter. We'll soon know." So saying he cut his engine and put the nose of the aircraft down in a glide towards the object of their scrutiny.

He flew round the place twice, the first time at about two hundred feet and the second time even lower. Ginger watched closely for a movement; but he saw none.

"There are no Arabs there now or they would have shown themselves,"

observed Biggles, as, correcting bumps all the time, he put the machine in to land.

Ginger relaxed with relief as the Proctor ran safely to a standstill.

Then he started as, for the first time, some of the objects on the ground showed signs of life.

Half a dozen vultures flapped heavily along the ground before taking wing in a slow, spiral course towards the merciless sun.

"I don't like the look of that," muttered Biggles.

"Those stinking birds are gorged with food. Did you notice how they took off? They were definitely overloaded."

As Ginger jumped down the rays of the sun struck him like a blow. Heaven and earth alike seemed to glow. All around the hot air danced and trembled on the shining surface of Qarren, hard-baked sabkha. The silence was complete. Nothing interrupted a dreadful stillness. Even the drone of the reserve machine, circling overhead, seemed to be smothered by an overwhelming hush.

"Phew! What a dustbin!" he murmured, and then followed Biggles who began walking slowly towards the wadi, which he now saw was the
usual page 38

dried-up water-course; or, more correctly, a gulley worn in the sands by storm-water during a deluge in the past. It was quite shallow. About a hundred yards wide at the rim, and thirty or forty feet deep, narrowing at the bottom, it meandered away following the fall of the ground, which was toward the south. In places it had been cut down to the bed rock but after half a mile or so it petered out to a mere sandy depression.

Reaching the object of their flight Biggles stopped and looked about him.

Then he took a cigarette from his case, tapped it on the back of his hand and lighted it. "Looks as if we've wasted our time" he remarked evenly.

This expressed precisely what Ginger was thinking; for with the exception of one or two straggling bushes the whole area had been burnt. Where obviously the main growth of scrub had been, was now a charred area of earth from which projected a few woody stems. The dark area that had been observed from the air was now explained.

But this was not all. There were other things and they were not pretty.

Scattered about were bones, mostly complete skeletons of men and camels to which scraps of sun-dried flesh still adhered. But from the bleached condition of some of the bones it was evident that the owners of these miserable relics had been dead for some time. There were two exceptions.

Lying at the foot of a big rock in the wadi as if they had sought the meagre shade it would provide, were two Arabs, their bodies emaciated to mere skin and bones.

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Biggles went down to them, and a glance was sufficient to reveal that one of them at least had been dead for some days. The body had not decomposed, but had merely been shrivelled up like a mummy by the relentless sun. The other looked as if death had only recently overtaken him, and the cause was in plain view. Under the foot of a rock a hole had been scooped. The bottom, rather darker than the surrounding sand, still showed finger—marks, as if the last act of the wretched Arab had been to strive to reach the liquid that lay below. In this he had failed.

Clearly, the place was the water-hole. For all practical purposes it was dry. It looked as if the desert had claimed more victims.

Dropping on his knees, Biggles turned the body over and looked at the face. A sharp intake of breath suggested surprise at something, but he did not speak. The eyes of the Arab were closed. Biggles raised an eyelid. Then, moving swiftly, he bent low and laid an ear on the man's

chest. Suddenly he sprang up. "Water!" he snapped. "Fetch water."

Gasping in the heat Ginger ran back to the machine and returned with a water-bottle. Without a word he handed it to Biggles who, not without difficulty, after splashing a little on the immobile face, got a small quantity between the black and shrivelled lips. He went on dabbing the lips with a wetted corner of his handkerchief. "I'm not sure that this man is dead," he said at last, although his actions had already made this explanation unnecessary.

Ginger sat down on the skull of a dead camel and watched Biggles working on what at first they had

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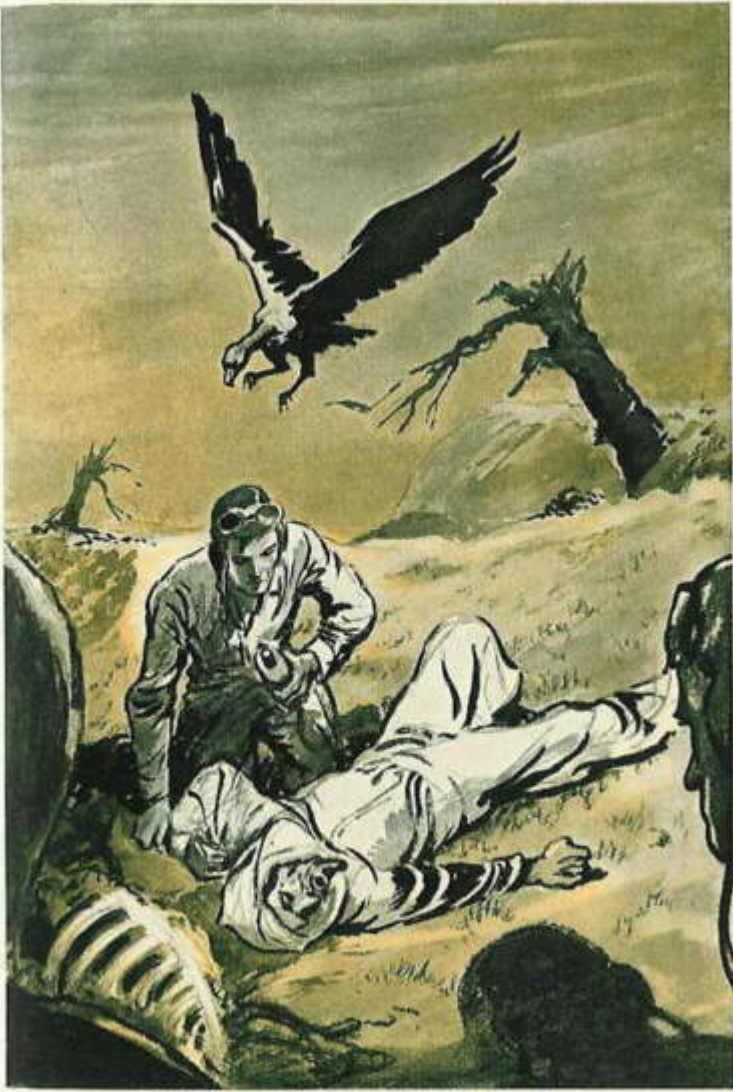
supposed to be a corpse. It went on for some time, and he marvelled at Biggles' patience, for he felt sure that it would all be to no purpose.

The heat was appalling, and he moved constantly so that the fierce rays did not strike his exposed skin always in one place. Then, looking again at the unconscious face, a strange feeling came over him that he had seen it before. Yet it was typical of the true desert breed, fierce, haughty, a nose like an eagle's beak and a high, intelligent forehead. The man might have been forty, not more. He wore a small pointed black beard and a drooping moustache. His hair also was black, uncombed and glossy with oil.

"You know, Biggles," said Ginger in a curious voice, "I've got a feeling I've seen that chap somewhere. "

"You've seen his photo," said Biggles quietly, still working on the patient. "He's one of Darnley's men—the one named Zahar, if my memory serves me." He splashed more water on the thin face.

"I think you might as well bring the other machine down," he went on presently. "We may be here for some time and there's no point in leaving Bertie up there. One machine is down all right, anyway."



He splashed more water on the thin face.

Ginger complied without enthusiasm. If the truth must be told he was by no means happy about the turn events had taken. Death stood too close.

His last victim still lay on the burning sand. If anything should go wrong they would soon be lying on the sand beside him. However, he made the necessary signal and watched the reserve machine land and taxi up to their own, where the engine was switched off.

"And what goes on, old boy?" asked Bertie as he jumped down. .

"I don't know, except that the place is a charnel-house," answered Ginger moodily. "There's an Arab. Biggles thinks he's still alive and is trying to bring him round. The gurra is all burnt out. There's nothing here except bones. The place gives me the willies."

They walked to the wadi to find, to Ginger's astonishment, that Biggles's efforts had so far been successful that the Arab's eyes were opened, although they still held a vacant stare.

But in ten minutes the man was able to sip a little water. A little while later he was grabbing at the cup, muttering incoherently. Slowly his eyes cleared as consciousness returned.

"Talk about snatching a bloke from the beastly jaws of death, and all that sort of thing," murmured Bertie, polishing his eye-glass.

"It was worth trying," remarked Biggles, satisfaction in his voice.

"Apart from any other consideration, it would have been a pity had there been no survivor to tell us what happened here. If this chap can't tell us, we shall never know."

"Does it matter?" enquired Ginger. "I mean, the stuff is burnt. Somebody else has done the job for us. That suits me fine. It's quite warm enough here without lighting bonfires."

"I'm not so sure about that," replied Biggles thoughtfully. "I have an idea that there's more in this affair than meets the eye. While you were away I found that and had a look in it." He pointed to page 42

a small lizard—skin bag, tied at the throat with a strip of the same material.

Ginger picked it up, untied the knot and inserted his hand. When he withdrew it, and opened it, it was to reveal a number of tiny brown pellets sticking to it. There was also a yellow object about the size of a marble. This, too, was sticky, and he had difficulty in removing it from his fingers and getting it back in the bag. It left a queer, sickly, but aromatic smell.

"You realise what that is?" asked Biggles, who was watching.

"Gurra, I imagine."

"I don't think there can be any doubt about it," declared Biggles. "I'd say the little brown things are seeds of the plant that produces the stuff."

"Then it looks as if this chap came here to collect both gum and seeds."

"One or the other, certainly. He didn't come alone either. There were at least two of them. I've been looking at his pal, the one who died, and unless I'm mistaken it's Kuatim, another of Darnley's camellmen from Aden. Now we know why they couldn't be found there."

"Absolutely," murmured Bertie. "It looks as if they ran into a considerable spot of bother—if you see what I mean. I wonder what went wrong."

"That's what I'm hoping this chap will be able to tell us," replied Biggles. "Maybe they reckoned on finding water in the water-hole, instead of which they found it dry. Maybe their camels strayed. Maybe they lit a fire, and the whole place caught

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fire and doped them. Anyhow, the fact remains that they got stuck here.

One died, and the other was at his last gasp when we arrived. Judging

from the way that the rest of the bones have been picked by vultures, I imagine the original Arabs that Darnley saw here all died long ago.

Another fact that emerges is, Darnley was obviously wrong in supposing that the gurra was a secret of his own. These fellows knew about it or they wouldn't have come back. The important question is, did they come to get some for their personal use or had they other ideas about it? That's what I'm hoping Zahar will tell us. According to Darnley the fellow speaks English."

At this juncture the Arab muttered something, but what he said no one knew, for the language, presumably an Arabic dialect, was unknown to any of them. "Try him in English," suggested Ginger, as Biggles allowed the man to take a little more water.

Apparently the Arab overheard this, for he suddenly burst out with:

"There is no God but God."

"That's better," said Biggles smiling.

"May the sword of God strike the traitor and all his brood," croaked Zahar.

"Who was the traitor, O Zahar?" asked Biggles quietly.

"Abu bin Hamud—may his face be blackened." Biggles threw a quick glance at the others, eyebrows raised. "So that was it," he said softly. Then, to Zahar. "You came here with him, eh?"

"I did, may God forgive me."

"Where is he now? "

"Allaha alim. God is the knower .. Hamud took page 44

our camels and left us here." The sick man's strength was returning, and he raised himself on an elbow. "Wallah! What Arabs are you?" he

demanded hoarsely.

Biggles did not smile, knowing that to an Arab all men are Arabs of one tribe or another. "We are friends of Darnley Sahib, whom doubtless you remember," he explained.

"He is in my face," answered Zahar, struggling into a sitting position and rolling his eyes with relish as Biggles gave him more water in small doses.

"Tell us what happened here," requested Biggles. "Presently we will take you back to Aden."

"Where are your camels?" demanded Zahar, looking round.

"We came in an aeroplane," Biggles told him.

"God is great," breathed Zahar. "It was his will. I, and Kuatim, came here with Abu bin Hamud—may his children perish! He said there was a place he knew where there was a sort of hashish that we would sell to the farengi (foreigner) for much money, and grow rich."

"You have been here before?" prompted Biggles. "That is the truth,"

agreed Zahar. "At that time there were many Arabs here dying. When we came again, all were dead, and the bones of their camels had begun to whiten in the sand. That, doubtless, was the will of Allah. Then, said Abu bin Hamud—may God punish him!—we will collect this gum, and seeds of the plant, and afterwards destroy everything, so that we alone shall hold the secret. This we did. In the morning we would return to Aden.

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But when I awoke at the hour of the first prayer, Abu had gone, taking all the camels with him, as was written plainly in the tracks in the sand. So Kuatim and I cursed him and his mother and prepared for death, knowing there was no escape. No rain falls. The water in the

hole dries up. With the vultures we ate the camels of the Arabs already dead until only bones remain. Then Kuatim died, and I lay down to die too. That is all, Sahib. From the sleep of death I awoke to find you here. It was as God willed." The Arab was recovering his strength, but he now sank back exhausted by his effort.

"As you say, O Zahar, it was as God willed," answered Biggles. He turned to Ginger. "Slip back to the machine and get a bar of chocolate and some Horlicks from the emergency rations."

As Ginger went off Biggles turned again to Zahar. "And Abu bin Hamud took with him the gum you had collected?"

"There was but little, and we collected it with much labour," answered Zahar. "The Arabs who were here had used most of it. They had used it for their fires and their camels had for long browsed on it. But that which was in my bag, and the bag of Kuatim, this Abu took."

"And what of the seeds? " asked Biggles.

"We plucked them where we found them, but there were not many, and these Abu took also, doubtless to sell to the farengi."

" Why do you think he left you here?" enquired Biggles.

The Arab hesitated. "God is the knower. Perhaps page 46

so that he could keep all the money from the sale of the gurra. Perhaps he would have our camels, for mine was a nice cow. Or it may be that he feared we should finish our water too soon in the desert, and perish. Abu bin Hamud was a man who would think of such things, may God forgive him."

"Why did you put fire to the place?" asked Biggles. " Why was it not left, so that you could make money by it year by year?"

Zahar pondered the question. "I know not the answer. Abu said it was

to prevent others from finding the secret. It may be the truth. I did as he said without giving the matter thought."

"He did not say where he would sell the stuff?"

"No. Of this he said nothing."

"He did not mention a farengi by name?"

"No."

At this point Ginger returned with the condensed food, and for the next half-hour they sat round while the Arab ate and drank eagerly, with obvious benefit to his condition.

At last Biggles got up. "Enough has been said here," he told Zahar. "We will talk again in Aden."

"Then let us depart from this place for it is accursed," said Zahar, as with some difficulty he got to his feet.

Biggles turned to the others. "All he needs now is food. Give him a hand to get into the machine."

Chapter 4

Biggles Makes a Call

At six o'clock the same evening, Biggles, Ginger and Bertie, sat in a quiet corner of the Club lounge talking to Jerry Norman. Zahar had been taken home, in a car borrowed from the aerodrome, with orders to remain silent about what had happened in the desert; and it was hoped that a small sum of money, to enable him to buy food, would show him which side his bread was buttered. Not that there had been much doubt about this, for it was evident from his conversation that his main purpose in life now was to find the man who had left him to his fate; in which case something very unpleasant was likely to

happen to Abu bin Hamud.

Norman had been as good as his word. He had made enquiries, but without much success. All he knew was, the three Arabs were not in Aden. Biggles, who realised that he would have to take this useful man into his confidence, was able to tell him why.

"No wonder I couldn't find them," muttered Norman, when the events of the desert had been narrated.

"What I've got to do now is to find this treacherous rascal, Hamud," went on Biggles. "He seems to be the link in the chain between the original supply of gurra and those who are exploiting it. Of course, Hamud himself may be unaware of how far the racket

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has gone. It's doubtful if he'd use the stuff himself, so he must have a market for it. What I don't understand is why he burned the wadi. If he was getting a good price for the gurra one would have thought he'd have gone out of his way to protect his source of supply. We know he collected some seeds. What did he intend to do with them? It isn't like an Arab to give himself extra trouble by cultivating something which Allah had already provided. But for what Zahar has told us about the stuff being burnt deliberately, I should have said it was set on fire by accident.

Hamud knows the answer. That's why I've got to get hold of him. It's the fact that he's got some seeds that worries me. Our job was to burn the stuff. Well, it's been burnt; but while there are seeds floating loose, we can't call the case closed. It's a queer thought, but if what Raymond says about this stuff is true the fate of western civilisation may rest on a handful of seeds."

"I'm afraid you're going to find it difficult to locate Hamud," said Norman thoughtfully. "It's pretty certain he isn't in Aden, which means that he might be anywhere within five hundred miles. He might have taken on with another expedition, although if he had I should have thought that I'd have known about it. All I've been able to find out is, he appeared in Aden a few weeks ago. Then he disappeared again.

There's nothing remarkable about that because these camel—men are always coming and going. I got this information out of the woman where he lives under the pretext of organising another crossing of the Rub al Khali. An Arab I know, who keeps in

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touch with things, told me that while Hamud was here he was seen with Nicolo Ambrimos. In fact, they went into Ambrimos' office. He may have got a job with him. Ambrimos employs a lot of Arabs in one way or another."

"Who is Ambrimos?" asked Biggles.

Norman smiled. "The Sultan. That's his nickname here. He's a very successful business man, a man of many interests, but primarily an incense merchant, although he handles anything in the way of page 50

merchandise. He owns several dhows with which he runs a coastal transport service, picking up dates from Muscat, coffee from Mocha—anything that's going, in fact. He carries general freight for anyone, and as he owns one of the few concerns that call at the smaller Red Sea ports, he is really very useful. At one time he was talking of starting an air line between Muscat and Egypt, for urgent mail and small stuff—and he may be going on with it for all I know. But I've heard nothing about the scheme lately so he may have dropped it. From the way his business has prospered, he must be pretty shrewd. He has made a lot of money. The whisper here is, he got his start by dabbling in honey."

"Honey?" Biggles looked surprised. "I haven't noticed the bees or the flowers."

Norman chuckled. "Honey, my dear fellow, is the local name for hashish."

"I see," said Biggles slowly, his eyes on Norman's face. "Dope, eh?"

"That's only rumour, so don't take my word for it," replied Norman.

"Honey is a profitable line so long as you don't get caught with it.

Fortunes have been made out of it, and are still being made, in spite of the Government's efforts to stop it. But what hope has the Government got when half the population of the Middle East uses it ? Here, hashish is what tobacco is to Britain."

Biggles stroked his chin. "Hm. I wonder if that could account for the Sultan's interest in Hamud?"

"Could be," agreed Norman. "Hamud might be a carrier for him in his spare time. There's no doubt

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that a lot of hashish finds its way into Egypt on the back of a camel."

"Tell me more about this man," requested Biggles. " I might as well explore every possibility while I'm here. What's his nationality?"

Norman shook his head. "That's anyone's guess. Mine is that he's a Levantine of very mixed parentage. He's a charming man, mind you. He speaks English as well as we do. In fact, he claims he was at Oxford; I've never checked up and it may be true, but I doubt it. He must be in his fifties now. Very particular about his personal appearance—buys expensive clothes and all that. In one word I'd call him elegant. He owns offices and warehouses and lives in one of the best villas in the place."

"Where does he live?"

"Are you thinking of calling on him?"

"I might."

"For what purpose? If he had an interest in this new dope, he'd hardly be likely to admit it."

"He might know where Hamud is to be found. If he knows, there's no reason why he shouldn't tell me—provided he has no personal interest in the man's visit to the Wadi al Arwat."

"I see what you mean. He'll wonder what you want with him, anyway."

"I could tell him I'm thinking of organising an expedition to look for signs of oil in the desert, and I got Hamud's name, with a strong recommendation, from Doctor Darnley."

Norman looked pensive. "You could try it, but even if he knows where Hamud is—and if Hamud

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called on him when he was in the town he probably will know—it's unlikely that he'll tell you. You don't get straight answers to questions in this part of the world. Still, I don't see that you could do any harm as long as you don't let him spot your real interest. Be careful. The Sultan has spies everywhere, remember. That's in the ordinary course of business.

He's the first man to know what the date crop is likely to be in any district you care to name. He knows what the next frankincense yield will be like, and the quality. In that way he controls the market. If a big pearl is found anywhere on the coast, the Sultan is the first man to know about it. He pays for such information. That, as I say, is straightforward business here, and such methods are not unknown at home if it comes to that."

"Quite," murmured Biggles. "By the same token, if the secret of the new narcotic leaked out he would be the first to hear about it. And if—I say if—Hamud had been one of his hashish smugglers, he'd probably go to the man with the story for the sake of the reward which he knew would be forthcoming."

Norman nodded. "There's something in that," he agreed. "But you watch your step, my lad, or one dark night you'll find a dagger in your ribs.

That's what happens to people here if they start asking too many questions."

"So I believe," replied Biggles. "But I'm satisfied that the only gurra that was brought here arrived in Hamud's bag. Kuatim died in the desert.

Zahar's bag, and its contents, I bought from him, so we know where that is. Darnley himself we can rule out.

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That only leaves Hamud. If he had only some gurra I wouldn't mind, because that would soon be used up. But he collected seeds, and while there are seeds there will be plants, and while there are plants there will be dope. I've got to get those seeds or find out where they went."

Norman looked grave. "Be very careful. I'll help you as much as I can," he promised. "Tomorrow I'll take a stroll along the water-front. One of the Sultan's dhows is in. There's just a chance that I might pick up news of Hamud."

"Do you think that's wise?" queried Biggles dubiously. "If you let it be known that you're looking for Hamud people will wonder why. The man who really knows, and I imagine somebody does know, will hear about it. He may also hear that we've been with you and link the two things together."

"There's always that possibility, of course."

"Surely the man to make enquiries is Zahar," opined Biggles. "It's known that he has been associated with Hamud, so such enquiries would be quite natural. It's hardly likely that Hamud will have told anyone about what happened in the desert. And anyhow, Zahar is on

his own account anxious to find the fellow who pinched his camel and left him to perish in the wilderness."

"Quite right," concurred Norman. "Zahar is the man for the job."

"Perhaps you'd better ask Zahar to try to find out where Hamud has gone,"

suggested Biggles. "I'd rather not be seen talking to him too much in Aden,

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or the people we're up against might put two and two together. It's pretty certain they don't know about the affair in the desert. In fact, it's just possible that they told Hamud to dispose of his companions, who subsequently might talk too much."

Norman nodded. "I think you're right. One can't be too careful. How about a drink?"

"I could do with one," admitted Biggles. "Talking is thirsty work. I'd like something long and cold."

"Iced lemon?" questioned Norman.

"That'll do fine."

The other made the same choice. Norman pressed the bell and gave the order to a dark-skinned waiter who answered it.

"Well, I don't think there's anything more we can do for the moment," remarked Biggles, as the waiter served the drinks. "I'll go along and see Ambrimos about some men for my oil prospecting outfit."

"Oil has been found in several areas not far away," remarked Norman.

"So I believe," returned Biggles. He took a long drink from his glass as Norman signed the chit for the drinks, and the waiter departed.

"I'll send my man along to Zahar right away to say that I want to see him in the morning," promised Norman.

"Are you going alone to see Ambrimos? " Ginger asked Biggles.

"I think so. There's no need for us all to go. I'll go straight back to the hotel afterwards. What's the Sultan's address, Norman?"

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"The Villa el Paloma in the Stretta Fontana. Biggish place, with double entrance gates. Stands back on the left. You can't miss it. It used to belong to an Italian count."

Biggles lingered a little while over his drink and then got up. "I'll drift along," he said, and collecting his hat from the vestibule went out into the hot, starry night.

He walked to the Villa el Paloma, one reason being that he felt like a little exercise, and another, he wanted to think.

He found the house without difficulty in the blue moonlight. White-painted and lavishly decorated, it was even more imposing than he had expected. He went up the drive to the front door and rang the bell. The door was opened by an Arab footman in

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spotless white, who, in reply to Biggles's enquiry as to whether Mr.

Ambrimos was at home, invited him into a hall that was adorned with so much costly furniture that it was obviously intended to impress visitors.

Biggles was, in fact, impressed. The Villa was clearly the home of a man of wealth. The Arab salaamed and beckoned. Biggles followed him to one of several doors leading off the hall, where he was then shown into a room filled with a mixture of European and Oriental furniture. A horsehair sofa looked strangely out of place between two Turkish divans.

A man came round a desk, at which he had evidently been seated, hand outstretched. "Good evening, Major Bigglesworth," said he, blandly.

"Luckily I was spending the evening at home or I might have missed you.

So you are thinking of looking for an oil concession in the district?"

Biggles took the proffered hand hoping that his face did not express the surprise he certainly felt at this unexpected greeting. It had, he realised, been chosen for that very reason; but that did not explain how the man knew his name or business, for he had announced neither. However, the remark betrayed one weakness in the man—vanity. It flattered him to show off his inside knowledge of other people's business.

"You seem very well informed, Sir," answered Biggles calmly.

"A man has to be, in this part of the world, you know, if he would hold his own with his competitors," was the suave reply. "Please be seated."

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"Your information let you down in one respect," asserted Biggles. "Who told you I was a major? " The Sultan smiled. "No one," he admitted readily. " But it's good policy to give a man a title above his station.

It puts him on good terms with himself."

"Well, you're frank about it, anyway," returned Biggles.

"And why not?" .

"Why not, indeed?" Biggles spoke cautiously, for his mind was busy trying to work out how the man had forestalled his excuse that he was looking for oil, for he had mentioned this to no one except Norman, who was, presumably, still at the Club. Not only was Ambrimos already in possession of this information" but Biggles had a feeling that the man was expecting him. Clearly, his spies had wasted no time.

"What can I offer you in the way of refreshment?" asked the Sultan.

Biggles glanced at the table. "I see you were just having some coffee."

"I was."

"May I have some?"

"Of course. I can recommend it, for I grow it myself at Mocha. Mocha coffee has lost its popularity, but it is still the best." Ambrimos clapped his hands.

The footman appeared instantly.

"Fresh coffee and two cups," ordered the Sultan curtly. He turned to Biggles. "Will you take a little brandy with it?"

"No thanks." Biggles smiled. "I still hold the old-fashioned notion that alcohol in a hot climate is something one is better without."

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"A pity more of your countrymen don't take that view," returned Ambrimos.

"Now, what can I do for you?"

Biggles had by this time taken stock of his host, and he saw that Norman's description, while brief, had been apt. An "elegant Levantine"

described him exactly. He judged the man to be in the early fifties, with the unhealthy stoutness that so often goes with that age in the East. His face was round and clean-shaven, with a skin of that curious intermediate tint that is usually the result of a mixture of European and Asiatic blood. His hair was black, and brushed so flat that it gleamed like patent-leather. His dress, in old-fashioned European style, was immaculate. He wore a frock-coat, striped trousers and patent leather shoes. A massive gold watch-chain hung across his paunch.

"Well, you seem to know my business, so I'll come to the point right away," said Biggles. "Did you by any chance meet Doctor Darnley when he was here?"

The Sultan pushed forward an expensive-looking box of cigars. "Yes, indeed. I know him well. A most charming man. I had the honour of helping him to equip his last expedition."

"I was hoping to find in Aden three Arab camel-men who accompanied him on that occasion," explained Biggles. "He speaks very highly of them."

"But surely you don't need Arabs for an air operation? "

Biggles had not mentioned aircraft but he allowed the reference to pass.

"True," he agreed. But one

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can't find oil from the air. An air survey may reveal likely areas, and

even oil-bearing strata, but at the finish the surveyor must examine the ground on his feet."

"Quite so. Quite so. Of course. Who are these men you had in mind?"

"Their names were Abu bin Hamud, Kuatim and Zahar," answered Biggles.

The Sultan massaged his smooth cheeks thoughtfully. "I remember them, but where they are now I couldn't even guess. I have a vague idea they went off into the desert on some business of their own and as far as I know they haven't come back. In fact, I haven't seen them since they returned from Darnley's expedition. May I ask who told you that I might be able to help you in this matter?"

"Certainly," returned Biggles, realising that it was no use dissembling, for if the man knew about the oil survey he must know where the project was discussed, and with whom. "I was speaking in the Club with Captain Norman and asked his advice. He told me you were the best-informed man in Aden."

The Sultan laughed softly. "He was probably right, too. But on this occasion, I am afraid, my intelligence service has failed me."

Biggles sipped the coffee that had been placed before him on a small table. It gave him an opportunity to think. He knew that the man must be lying for according to Norman he had been seen with Hamud when the Arab had returned from the wadi; and if he had spoken to Hamud, the chances were that he knew what had happened to Kuatim and

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Zahar. Hamud, no doubt, supposed his companions to be dead. The Sultan, therefore, would have the same belief.

Biggles decided to fire a shot in the dark. "How long is it since you saw any of these men?" he queried. "Oh, months ago."

"In that case your intelligence service certainly did let you down," said

Biggles quietly, with his eyes on the Sultan's face. "You see, there is talk of Zahar having been seen in Aden quite recently."

The shot found its mark. The Sultan started slightly. He frowned. For several seconds he was silent. Then he said sharply: "Who told you that?"

"Somebody happened to mention it in passing," answered Biggles casually.

"I'm sure he must have been mistaken," declared the Sultan.

"Why?" asked Biggles evenly. "Was there any reason why he shouldn't return to Aden?"

"No—no ... Of course not," said Ambrimos quickly. "I mean," he corrected himself, "no reason that I know of. I will enquire into this."

There was something in the way the Sultan said the last few words that made Biggles regret he had divulged the fact that Zahar had returned. He perceived now that he might have put the Arab in danger. If Ambrimos wanted him to be dead, the chances were that he soon would be.

Biggles got up. "Well, I won't take up any more of your time, Mr.

Ambrimos. It was kind of you to see me. I shall probably be in Aden for a day

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or two so if you should learn anything of these men, perhaps you will let me know."

"I will, most certainly," promised Ambrimos emphatically.

He himself saw Biggles to the door, showed him out and after a final assurance of his co-operation, closed it behind him.

Chapter 5

Knotty Problems

DEEP in thought Biggles walked slowly down the shrub—fringed drive towards the gates. He had not learned much, but his time, he felt, had not been wasted. The man he had just left was typical of a type fairly common in the Middle East—shrewd, self-centred, and utterly unscrupulous where his interests were concerned; interests that revolved chiefly about the business of making money. That he had little regard for truth was demonstrated when he said he had not seen Hamud. Indeed, he had professed complete ignorance. Yet, if Norman was to be believed, not only had he seen him but he had taken him into his office. Why had he lied? pondered Biggles. A man only lies when he has something to hide. Still, the fact that he was a liar did not necessarily mean that he was connected with the new drug. Yet he was just the sort of man who would be interested, the sort of man who would instantly perceive its possibilities as a means of making big profits.

Hamud knew about the drug. That, at least, was an established fact. If he had worked for Ambrimos in the hashish racket he would certainly mention it to him, because, if for no other reason, if the gurra proved popular it might put hashish off the market altogether. Hamud might even have page 63

gone to Ambrimos with a view to marketing the stuff, this being beyond his own financial or organising ability. It was even possible that he had gone straight to Ambrimos when Darnley had paid him off, and Ambrimos had sent him back to collect a supply of gurra forthwith. That Hamud had told someone was almost certain or he would not have behaved as he had. Had he merely required some gurra for his own use there was enough in the wadi to last him a life—time. Why, therefore, should he attempt to murder his companions? And why should he bother about collecting seeds?

Biggles's problem, of course, was not so much to find Hamud, who

alone could not do much harm, as the man in whom he had confided his secret.

That man, decided Biggles, would almost certainly live in Aden, Hamud's home town, and the place where Darnley had paid him off. The only clue—a slender one admittedly—pointed to Ambrimos, who had seen him, yet now denied it. If Ambrimos had already dabbled in hashish, as rumour alleged, he would not be beyond trafficking in gurra. Moreover, he would have a ready-made organisation for smuggling the stuff into Egypt, or wherever it was going in the first place. The channels that had been used for hashish could could equally well be used for gurra.

Following the same line of thought, it was clear that as the Sultan had never been caught dealing with hashish, his method of handling it was clever; so if he was now starting on a new line in gurra it would be no easy matter to catch him at the game.

Reaching the gates Biggles stopped to light a

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cigarette as a new thought struck him, one that needed consideration, for on it depended which way he should go—to the Club, to his hotel or to the native quarter. How much did Ambrimos know about his own movements? That he knew a certain amount was evident. He had mentioned aircraft. Did he know that he, Biggles, had brought Zahar in from the desert, for no attempt had been made to hide the Arab when he had landed? The need had not arisen. He was inclined to think that Ambrimos did not know of Zahar's return. At all events, his surprise when Biggles, announced the fact had seemed genuine. But if he knew from Hamud the circumstances in which Zahar had been abandoned—which would account for his surprise when he learned he was back—he would soon make it his business to find out how Zahar had performed the apparent miracle of getting home without a camel and without water. If he learned, as he almost certainly would, that Biggles had brought him back in an aircraft, then Biggles's own enquiries about the man would be exposed for what they were worth. The Sultan's suspicions could hardly fail to be aroused. He would find out just who Biggles was after which his spies would never take their eyes off him.

Norman had said that his spies were everywhere and the man himself had practically boasted of it. Indeed, it had already been demonstrated. The waiter at the Club was in his pay. That was certain, or how else could Ambrimos have known about his excuse that he was looking for oil? For it had only been made up on the spur of the moment during the conversation with

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Norman—when, Biggles recalled, the waiter had been serving drinks.

It followed, therefore, that if Ambrimos was in fact the man he was looking for, the man who was exporting gurra, then he, Biggles, had unwittingly put Zahar's life in danger. Ambrimos could not afford to have Zahar walking about Aden spreading the news of Hamud's treachery, for this would involve the reason for the trip to the Wadi al Arwat.

Something would have to be done about that. Zahar would have to be warned, and very soon, before Ambrimos could get on his track.

Biggles made up his mind. He would go to Zahar right away. He owed it to the man. And there were other reasons why he was anxious that no harm should come to the Arab. Zahar was the only living witness of what had happened at the Wadi al Arwat. He might, when he had fully recovered, recall some remark made by Hamud that would throw light on the case.

But before Biggles had taken half a dozen paces there came a sound from the direction of the big house that caused him to turn his head sharply in that direction. A car door had been slammed. What car? Whose car? Was Ambrimos going out after all, although he had said he was not? Retracing his steps quickly, by the time he had reached the gates the glow of moving headlights had appeared at the top end of the drive. Realising that in another moment they would be on him, and preferring not to be seen, he ducked into the shrubs. And there he crouched while the lights came on slowly, presently

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to pass within a couple of yards and turn into the main road.

He saw little of the car or its occupants. All he could make out in the moonlight was a big, dark-painted saloon, with a vague figure at the wheel. A curtain covered the rear window.

Biggles hesitated, aware of a sudden sense of alarm and urgency, for which, as he told himself, there was

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really very little cause. But with Zahar on his mind his fears for him were redoubled. Ambrimos, he was sure, was not a man to waste time. If he was fearful of what Zahar might divulge he would act quickly to prevent it. In vain did Biggles tell himself that such fears were groundless—that the car might have gone out on anyone of a hundred errands. But he could not rid himself of the thought that he had put Zahar's life in jeopardy, and if his fears were realised, he would never forgive himself. Yet there was nothing he could do. Zahar lived some distance away, in the native quarter. Whatever he did he could not get to the man's house before the car, if that was in fact the objective for which the car was making. Nor was there any way in which he could get in touch with Zahar. Controlling his impotence, not without difficulty, he lit a cigarette.

For a moment he toyed with the idea of rushing to the house in the hope of finding the garage open and another car in it, for he remembered that Norman had mentioned that Ambrimos owned two or three. With a car, by speeding, he might still race the dark saloon. But common sense forced him to abandon this scheme. The circumstances did not justify such a desperate expedient. Had he been in a position to prove that Ambrimos was engaged in the drug traffic he would have risked it, knowing that Ambrimos would not dare to complain that a car of his had been stolen—for that is what it would amount to. But what if the Sultan was, after all, an innocent man? In that case he would certainly kick up a fuss, for which he could hardly be blamed. Nor would

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Biggles's excuse, that he suspected the man of drug-running, improve matters. No, decided Biggles. To put himself, a policeman, on the wrong side of the law was a risk he dare not take. It looked as if he could do no more than wait for the car to return.

Yet what purpose would that serve, he pondered?

He would learn no more than he had when the car went out. He thought of closing the iron gates. That would force the car to stop. But even then he would not be able to see inside it. The interior would still be in darkness, and he had no torch. That was his real problem.

Sitting on the bank to think the matter over, he estimated that if the car had gone to the native quarter it should be back in half an hour. If the man in it had killed Zahar he could do no more than try to bring the murderer to justice. Actually, he did not think this would happen, although it might happen later. It was far more likely that Ambrimos would want to talk to Zahar, if only to find out who had brought him back to Aden. He would be anxious to know if Zahar had told his rescuer about Hamud, and the reason for the visit to the wadi. With this information in his possession the Sultan could liquidate the Arab at his convenience.

That would be better than murdering the man in his own home, which would bring in the police. No. Zahar was a man who often disappeared for long periods. If he went away and did not come back no one would worry about him.

Feeling slightly better for this comforting thought, Biggles dropped his cigarette and put his foot on it.

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He still had not worked out how he could see the inside of the car when it returned. All he wanted to know was if Zahar was in it. If he was not, well and good. If he was, then he would soon have him out of it, or it was unlikely that he would ever be seen again. How this was to be done without being seen himself at first appeared impossible. If he were seen, the fact would be reported to Ambrimos even if the Sultan himself was not in the car. Ambrimos would guess

the reason for his interference and take warning. It would then be open war between them. Still, it was a risk that would have to be taken, resolved Biggles, for the thought of Zahar dying as a result of his own indiscretion lay heavily on his' conscience.

He looked at his watch. He still had a quarter of an hour to wait. If the car was not back in an hour, he might, he thought, assume that he had been mistaken in its purpose, in which case he himself would go to Zahar and move him to a safe place.

Still thinking, and regretting that he had not brought his torch, an idea occurred to him. There was, after all, one way in which a light could be thrown on the scene. It involved risks, but since a man's life was at stake they were worth taking. Making up his mind quickly he set about putting the plan into action.

Moving quickly but quietly, keeping in the deepest shadows, he returned to the Villa, but instead of taking the carriage-way to the front door, kept to a secondary road which, as he expected, took him to the courtyard at the rear, around which the outbuildings were page
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situated. The double doors of a big garage gaped like a cavern. There was no one about although some of the windows of the house showed lights, so without hesitation he went straight over to the garage and walked in. A match, quickly extinguished, revealed three cars. The most convenient looked like a new American Buick. He got into the driver's seat, closed the door quietly and started the engine. The only sound it made to indicate that it was running was a gentle purr. Without switching on the lights he took the car out into the courtyard, turned, and without being challenged ran it down the drive stopping just inside the gates. Here he put on the hand-brake and switched off, so that the car effectually blocked the drive. Satisfied with this arrangement he got out, and leaving the door open took up a position in the shrubs near at hand. In the darkness the car was no more than a vague silhouette. Not a sound broke the silence of the sultry night.

Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. No one came into the drive. No one left the house. Biggles was not concerned anyway. If the car did not soon return he thought he could go home with a fair assurance that he had been mistaken in its mission.

However, things did not fall out that way. Shortly afterwards he heard a car approaching the drive, and from the way it slowed down he knew it was going to turn in. This, of course, confirmed his suspicions concerning its errand, and he moved quickly. First, he switched on the lights of the Buick, sending a white blaze straight down the drive. Then, bending low page 71

and keeping in the shrubs, he hurried to the gates, a matter of perhaps a dozen paces. By the time he had reached them the driver of the black saloon finding himself confronted by another vehicle which blocked the road, had stopped. He sounded his horn impatiently. As nothing happened he sounded it again. A few seconds later, as this had no effect he behaved as would any driver in such circumstances.

He flung open the door, got out, and walked towards the offending vehicle to see what was happening. Biggles, who could of course see everything plainly in the head—lights, noticed that the man was a negro, in the usual uniform of his trade.

This was the moment for which he had waited.

Everything depended on the next few minutes. Stepping out of the shrubs behind the black saloon he looked in through the nearest window. One glance was enough, for in the blinding head-lights of the Buick the interior of the car was as brightly illuminated as he had hoped it would be. Three Arabs were sitting on the back seat. The middle one was Zahar.

Feeling now on safer ground Biggles went to the nearest door and threw it open. "Hallo, Zahar!" he said. " You're the very man I've been looking for."

"He no come," rapped out one of the others harshly.

"Oh yes he can. I want to talk to him," said Biggles curtly. "Come on, Zahar."

Zahar moved, looking somewhat bewildered by this unexpected event.

One of the other Arabs held him back.

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Biggles's manner became brittle. "Come on, Zahar, I want you," he said tersely.

One of the Arabs thrust a hand into his gumbez, where, Biggles did not doubt, he carried a dagger.

But Biggles had his automatic out before he could produce it. "None of that," he snapped. Then, to Zahar: "Come on!"

Zahar, looking uncomfortable, obeyed. His escort scowled but did nothing, for which Biggles was glad, because out of the corner of his eye he could see the chauffeur returning; and the last thing he wanted was a fracas which could hardly fail to have awkward after-effects.

As soon as Zahar was out of the car Biggles slammed the door, caught the Arab by the arm and dragged him round the corner. "Quick," he muttered,

"those Arabs were going to kill you."

"But Sahib, they asked me to come with them to Ambrimos, who has backsheesh for me."



Biggles had his automatic out before the Arab could draw his dagger.

Biggles, still walking, answered: "In that house you would have died. Ambrimos is the man who ordered Hamud to leave you in the sands."

This, as Biggles realised, was rather stretching the point, but he was anxious that Zahar should be aware of his danger. The Arab did not answer. Apparently the statement had given him food for thought.

Looking back Biggles could see the chauffeur and his companions standing in the road, apparently at a loss to know what to do. He took a side turning and saw no more of them.

In a way he was sorry about what had happened, for it would inevitably tell Ambrimos more than he

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was ready for him to know. But there had been no alternative. He could not calmly stand there and watch Zahar go to his death—for he was positive that had the Arab entered the Villa he would never have left it alive. He could only hope that Ambrimos, in his alarm that would follow the incident, would make some blunder, some hasty move, that would incriminate him. For that the Sultan was concerned with Hamud and the gurra racket was no longer in doubt. His anxiety to get hold of Zahar was proof of that.

As soon as he thought they were safe from pursuit, Biggles stopped. "What story did those Arabs tell you?" he asked his companion.

"They came to me like friends—may God forgive them," answered Zahar.

"They said to me, our master has heard that you have suffered in the desert and would know the truth of it. For this he will reward you with backsheesh."

"I have reason to think it was he who sent Hamud to the Wadi al Arwat with orders to collect the gum, and afterwards leave you to die," said Biggles. "Doubtless he thought you were dead, for that is what Hamud would tell him; but learning that you had returned he would have questioned you, and when he had learned all that you could tell him his Arabs would have cut your throat so that you could tell no one else about what happened at the wadi."

"May God punish him," muttered Zahar fervently. "I shall be God's willing tool in this matter," promised Biggles grimly. "That is, if you will help me."

"Wallah! You may rely on it," swore Zahar.

"If you will enter my service you will be well paid and there will be no risk of prison at the end of it," suggested Biggles.

"It shall be as you say, Sahib."

"Then tell me this," requested Biggles. "Have you ever worked for Ambrimos ? "

Zahar hesitated. "Thus was it written," he admitted sadly.

"What work did you do?" Again the Arab hesitated.

"Shall I tell you?" murmured Biggles softly. Zahar looked startled.

"It is said," went on Biggles distinctly "that you carried hashish for him."

"I cannot deny it," admitted Zahar. "But how could you know of this? "

"Never mind how I know. Many stories come to my ear," asserted Biggles tritely. "Was Hamud in this business with you?"

"He was, and it is only because the traitor tried to kill me that I will speak of what I know, for my lips were sealed," answered Zahar. "Always we worked for the Sultan at the time our camels were moulting. We stuck the kief on their skins and on it the hair that had fallen off, so that no one guessed what we carried under our baggage."

"Kief?" queried Biggles. "What is this?"

"It is the best of all hashish, made from the flowers of the plant and

therefore worth most money," explained Zahar. "It is true that the Sultan would sell the top leaves of the plant, which is the common
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hashish, or the gum, which is called charas. But the rest of the plant, which is called gunjah, the Sultan threw away, because he wanted only the best hashish."

"Then the Sultan not only sells hashish but is a producer of it?"

prompted Biggles.

"That is the truth."

"And you would, no doubt, remember the place from where you fetched it? "

"We fetched it from the place where the accursed plant was grown, O sahib," stated Zahar.

"Grown!" Biggles stared, knowing that the cultivation of the hemp plant, from which hashish is derived, is confined mostly to Turkey, Greece and Afghanistan. "Do you mean the Sultan grows his own plants in this part of the world?"

"He grows it in the country of the Danokali, on the other side of the Red Sea, at a place called El Moab," declared Zahar. "There, in a wadi, he has a great store of water saved from the time of the rains, and this makes it possible to grow the plant even in the dry season."

To Biggles this was news indeed. "Just where is this place, El Moab?" he asked.

" It is in the desert behind Marsa Mekel, which is a small port on the coast, Sahib. From El Moab, most of the hashish goes by camel, but some goes straight to Egypt by aeroplane."

Again Biggles stared. "By aeroplane," he echoed. "Allah will bear witness to the truth of my words," said Zahar simply.

"Then there is a place for an aeroplane to land?"

"There is much sabkha, such as surrounds the page 76

Wadi al Arwat. Also there are places that were made for this purpose in the war, some by the Italians and some by the English."

"Such as surrounds the Wadi al Arwat," breathed Biggles, thinking fast as the significance of this remark struck him. And there would, of course, be old war-time air-fields, now abandoned. "And this aeroplane of which you speak! To whom does it belong?" he asked.

"To the Sultan."

"Who flies it?"

"I do not know, for I have not been near the man. I only know that he is a farengi."

"Have you been to this wadi where the hashish is grown?"

"Many times."

"How far is it from the coast?"

"Two days march."

Visualising the atlas Biggles saw that the place must be near the border of, if not actually in, Ethiopia. Could you show this wadi to me?" he inquired.

"Without question; but if we are found there by the Sultan's Arabs, or the Danakils, who are paid by the Sultan for their silence, it would be

death for both of us."

"Then we must see to it that we are not caught," answered Biggles. "How many men does the Sultan employ at this place?"

Zahar looked vague. "Many," was all he could say.

Biggles looked at his watch. "The hour grows late. We will talk more of this tomorrow. Can you

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find a place where you will be safe until the morning? For make no mistake, the Arabs of Ambrimos will soon be looking for you with daggers in their hands."

"And for you, too, by Allah," asserted Zahar, making it clear that he had now grasped the situation. But fear not for me, Sahib."

"Then meet me at the aerodrome at the hour of sunrise," ordered Biggles.

"It shall be as you say," confirmed Zahar.

With that Biggles left him and strode away towards the Club well-satisfied with his evening's work, for it had borne a heavier crop of fruit than he had expected. Not only was the Sultan in the hashish racket but he was actually growing the stuff in the wild hinterland on the other side of the Red Sea. If it was true, he thought, as Zahar had averred, that the terrain was similar to that of the Wadi al Arwat, it might well be that he intended to grow the new drug there, if in fact the plant was not already in cultivation. And Ambrimos, it seemed, although he had not advertised the fact, had decided to go in for air transportation after all. One thing with another, he felt that the pattern of the gurra racket was beginning to take shape.

Chapter 6

The Enemy Hits Back

At dawn the following morning Biggles was at the airfield, sitting on a chock, with a map spread on his knees, just inside the hangar in which the two machines had been parked. Ginger and Bertie, on empty oil drums, crouched near his shoulders, following with interest the point of his pencil as from time to time it moved across the map to support his observations.

Biggles had, of course, narrated to the others the events of the previous evening, and conveyed to them the gist of his enlightening conversation with Zahar, who, hunched up in his gumbez—for the early morning air was crisp—squatted on the concrete floor gazing with inscrutable eyes across the barren landing-area, hard-baked in the everlasting heat. Except that he was still very thin he showed few signs of his recent ordeal. Nothing of consequence had occurred, except that Biggles had sent a signal home, in code, asking for instructions.

"Of course, as the job we came to do had been done for us, we could have packed up and gone home," he was saying. "But I felt that it was leaving the job half done. At any rate, the burning of the stuff in the wadi didn't achieve what the Air Commodore intended. In fact, the position is now more serious than ever, because I am convinced that the gurra page 79

would not have been burnt unless someone intended growing the stuff elsewhere. And that person now has a supply of seed. When we came here we knew where the stuff grew—or we thought we did. Now we don't know, and our job won't be finished until we do. All the same, I didn't like to carry on without consulting Raymond, chiefly on account of the political angle. It looks as if we shall have to give this Danakil country the once-over. It's the only clue we have. But this is a pretty wide territory, as you can see from the map. If we were sure that the Ambrimos hashish outfit was in British territory I wouldn't hesitate. It may be in the Sudan. If it is, okay. But it's just as likely to be in Ethiopia, in which case, we really have no right to barge in. The thing would have to be handled through normal diplomatic channels, and a fat lot of use that would be. The Sultan's spies would soon let him know what was cooking. I imagine he is already thinking hard about

last night's affair. Anyway, I've switched the responsibility of what we do next, to Raymond. If he says come home, that's all right with me. If he says carry on—well, we'll do what we can to tidy up the business. It isn't going to be easy, though. The first problem that sticks out like a sore finger is this: to march up and down the Danakil country looking for something which may or may not be there, is out of the question. We aren't equipped for such a jaunt, and we should probably end up by being turned into pincushions by Danakil spearmen. For that, I believe, is how they discourage tourists.

On the other hand, If we fly over we shall certainly be spotted, in which case

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we might as well go and tell— Ambrimos right away what we intend doing.

Yet, as far as I can see, there's nothing else for it."

"We could fly over and have a dekho at the beastly place—if you see what I mean," put in Bertie. "No need to land, or anything like that."

"We should have to land sooner or later," argued Biggles. "Goofing at the stuff from up topsides, even if we could locate it, wouldn't do any good."

"It would be something to know just where Ambrimos has his dump," suggested Ginger.

"True enough," agreed Biggles. "I was thinking of looking for it for a start. Zahar may be able to point the place out to us, but I wouldn't reckon on it. It's one thing to know a place from ground level, but another matter to recognise it from five thousand. However, we can but try. As soon as our arrival is reported to Ambrimos by his gang, as it will be, no doubt he'll take steps to make things uncomfortable for us if we try to land anywhere near him. But there is this about it. He won't be able to shift his plantation, or whatever it is. The hemp plant from which he gets his dope is green, so we should be able to spot it.

As presumably the stuff requires water, it will probably be in the bottom of a wadi. I am assuming that where the hemp is, so will the gurra be—that is, if Ambrimos is the man we are looking for."

"What about this aircraft Zahar says he's using?" asked Ginger.

Biggles shrugged. "What about it? He's within his rights in employing one if he wants to. Our only

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concern is the purpose for which it's being used. Still, we can bear it in mind, and if necessary deal with it as occasion demands."

At this point of the conversation an airman appeared, carrying a small buff envelope. "From station headquarters, Sir," said he, as he handed it to Biggles, who tore it open and read the message it contained.

"All right; there's no answer," said Biggles.

The airman departed, probably wondering what civil pilots were doing on the aerodrome. The station commander had of course been told in confidence as much as the circumstances required.

Biggles folded the slip of paper and put it in his pocket book. "That's all I was waiting for," he remarked, getting up. "Raymond says: 'Go ahead—case now top priority'; from which we may assume that more dope has arrived in London to addle the brains of the poor fools who use it. Let's go and have a look at things. Zahar says he's willing to fly so he'll come with me and Ginger. Bertie, you can waffle along solo to keep an eye on us. If either machine has to land the other will stand by for signals.

It's a comfort to know that at a pinch, the ground permitting, we can pick each other up. Okay. Let's get along. By the way, in case we're being watched, I shall first trail a red herring by heading east. As soon as we're clear of the area, I shall swing north, and so round to the coast.

Within five minutes both machines were in the air, whispering along on an easterly course through an

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atmosphere as yet untormented by the sun, which still hung low over the horizon. Ginger, as usual, sat next to Biggles, with Zahar, looking somewhat incongruous, occupying the double-seat just behind him.

Automatically Ginger's eyes surveyed the scene ahead, and then dawdled round towards the north. In doing this they ran along the leading edge of the port wing. A slight movement, where there should have been no movement, arrested them. He stared. His expression changed and his face turned slightly pale. His right hand groped for Biggles's knee and gripped it. Put her down," he said, in a tense, dry voice.

Biggles asked no questions. "I can't," he answered. "I've only trees and rocks ahead."

"Then go back," ordered Ginger, without taking his eyes off the wing.

"Take it slowly."

As the nose of the machine began to come round Biggles asked: "What's wrong?"

"There's a hole in the leading edge, and the fabric's trying to 'balloon'."

Biggles did not speak again. He knew that Ginger would not make such a statement unless it were true. He also knew that if air was getting inside the plane, it would, under pressure, blow the wing up like a balloon and probably rip the entire fabric off.

Having completed his turn he throttled back almost to stalling speed, and losing height gently, headed back for the airfield. Fortunately

there was no wind, so it was not necessary to turn again, and a minute
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or two later he landed practically along the track from which he had taken off.

As the machine ran to a standstill, Ginger drew a deep breath, closed his eyes and shook his head. "Phew!" he breathed. "I can't stand shocks like that."

"What is it?" asked Biggles, preparing to get down.

He glanced at the reserve machine now landing beside them. "Bertie's all right, anyway."

"I don't know," replied Ginger. "First I saw the fabric bulging; then I saw a slit in the leading edge, opening and shutting like a mouth. I thought I was seeing things."

"Let's have a look," said Biggles briefly, and followed closely by Ginger, jumped down. He went straight to the damaged fabric, now plain to see, and examined it closely. "I'm a fool," he said bitterly. "I've made the old mistake of underestimating the quality of the enemy. This fabric was cut. Look at it. Cut as clean as if it had been done by a razor blade. The man who did it knew nothing about aircraft or he'd have cut through the main spar. If he had, it would have been a different story.

Good thing you noticed it."

Bertie walked up. "What's the trouble?" he inquired.

Biggles jerked a thumb at the sabotaged wing. "Somebody has been busy with a knife while our backs were turned," he said grimly. "That's no accidental tear."

Bertie whistled softly. "I say, that's nasty," he said earnestly. "Who do you think did it? "

"Somebody who wanted us out of the way and was cunning enough to make murder look like an accident. When I say us, I mean me. Presumably your machine is all right? Only mine was sabotaged. Perhaps the rat who did it thought two crashes from structural failure within five minutes of each other might look suspicious. I'm not flattering myself, but I suspect he knew which of the two machines was mine. Which means that we've been watched more closely than I suspected. Let's have a look at your machine?"

"

They walked over to Bertie's aircraft and examined it as closely as the circumstances permitted. They could find nothing wrong.

Biggles lit a cigarette. His expression was grave, as it was bound to be, for if there is one thing more than another calculated to affect the nerves of a pilot it is the threat of sabotage which, carried out by an expert, is seldom revealed until the mischief occurs and perhaps not then. After a crash, when everything is broken, it is almost impossible to discover the original fracture that caused the accident.

" Well, what are we going to do about it?" asked Ginger presently.

"I'm going on with the job," answered Biggles.

"In future, we'll mount guard over the machines. I shall have to take your machine, Bertie. You can taxi mine back to the sheds. You'll have to tell the station commander what has happened. Get him to put a patch over the damage. It's a simple fabric job and shouldn't take long. If there's any delay, you'd better wait here for me to come back; but

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if the job can be done within the next hour or so, you can follow on and try to pick us up. You know the area we're making for. If you don't meet me coming back you may find me in the vicinity of that old aerodrome I pointed out on the map, marked number 137. That's if I decide to land."

"As you say, old boy," agreed Bertie.

"While they're working on your machine, you'd better have a look round the airframe to make sure there are no more holes anywhere."

"You bet I will," answered Bertie warmly.

"All right, let's try again," said Biggles. "Get Zahar into this machine, Ginger. Don't tell him what's happened."

"He would probably say that it was done by the sword of God," muttered Ginger gloomily.

"I'd say it was done by the dagger of some dirty stinking Arab," declared Bertie.

"And you wouldn't be far wrong," Biggles told him.

In a few minutes, the transfer complete, Biggles was in the air again, heading east. Behind and below, a trail of dust showed where Bertie was taxiing the damaged machine back to the hangar.

As Biggles swung round on a course that brought the aircraft facing the narrow sea which they were to cross, Ginger was not particularly perturbed by the fact that they were now alone. The passage of the Red Sea, where he imagined Biggles would cross it, offered no perils. It was in fact so narrow that he could already see the outline of the sterile African

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coast. His main concern was, the aircraft was behaving normally. Had it been interfered with, he thought, the damage would by this time have been revealed. As for Zahar, his face gave no indication of his thoughts.

Flying, apparently, was merely another mode of travel. As he had said

before the start, his reliance was in God. If they reached their destination, so well and good. if not—well, it was the will of Allah.

Biggles did not cross the Red Sea at its narrowest point, which was somewhere to the south of where they struck it. Instead, he took up a new course to the north—west, which meant that he was flying almost straight up the long, narrow stretch of water, with the coast in sight on either hand—Africa on the one side and Arabia on the other, each protected by numerous outposts of islands. When Ginger remarked on the new course Biggles merely said that as it involved no extra trouble he was doing it to escape observation should Ambrimos have warned his agents to be on the look—out for him.

A few native craft with lateen sails, types almost as old as mankind itself, dotted the glittering surface of the famous biblical sea. In strange contrast, far to the north, making for the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean, a big liner churned a snowy wake and sent aloft a trail of murky smoke to mark its passage.

Biggles did not maintain his course for long. Zahar was asked to watch for, and point out, the minor port of Marsa Mekel, when they came to it.

This he was able to do without doubt or difficulty, for he had page 87

often sailed along the coast in Arab dhows when in the service of the Sultan.

With the port in sight, Biggles flew on a little way before turning to the left towards the land, thus crossing the coast-line some distance north of the area in which, according to Zahar, Ambrimos was producing hashish. The Arab had said that the place was two days' march from the coast. Biggles took that to mean not more than forty miles ; in other words, about twenty minutes of flying time. As to the port itself, there was little of interest to see. It consisted of a few shacks, mostly in ruins and apparently abandoned. Clearly, as a port, the place had seen better days. A dhow was lying, sails furled, just off the shore.

Ginger regarded with interest the territory towards which they were

now flying, although as far as he could see it differed little from the land they had just left. There was the same strip of white sand, washed by a lazy surf; the same sand dunes and occasional bluffs; the same monotonous camel—thorn and scrub, the same clusters of tired-looking palms, cacti and mimosa; the same twisting wadis and gorges; the same lines of whitened bones that marked the native trails. For the Arab never kills a worn-out camel or donkey. When its days are done a beast is just abandoned. The wretched animal wanders up and down the trail until it falls, to die eventually of thirst, soon to have its bones picked clean by those scavengers of the desert, the hyenas, jackals and vultures.

Beyond all this was the empty desert, sabkha and stony steppes, backed in the far distance by

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the vague shadows of the Abyssinian Highlands.

Ginger knew that Biggles had some scheme in mind, although he had not yet divulged it; so, thinking that the time had come for him to know what it was, he prompted: "Are you going to try to spot Ambrimos's place from the air?"

"That was the idea of coming here," Biggles pointed out. "But on the way over I've been thinking about it. What I should like to do is to spot the exact position from the air without going too near it. In any case, there's nothing we can learn about it from up here—except, of course, its position. Just what's going on below we shall have to ascertain from ground level. So I think the best plan is, first, to locate the place without going too close to it, and then cast around for somewhere to land—not too far away—from which we might make a sortie on foot. I don't necessarily mean that we shall land today. I shall be satisfied if we can pin-point Ambrimos's place, and decide on a landing-ground. I'd like to have a look at that war-time air-field marked 137. With this information, and a mental picture of the country, we should be able to devise some scheme for a closer inspection. I'm keeping to the north of the area because that's the direction from which the aircraft Ambrimos is using should come and go. I mean, we should cross its track if it's operating to Egypt. There's a chance we may catch sight of it."

At this juncture Zahar broke into the conversation.

For once he seemed almost excited. Jabbing with a brown finger in a south-westerly direction he cried: "Sahib! Sahib! That is the place."

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Ginger stared, but could see no conspicuous feature except a glittering streak which he took to be water. Near it there was a vague suggestion of low buildings, but nothing definite.

Biggles, also looking hard, sheered away from the spot Zahar had indicated.

"Try to get a picture of the country in your mind," ordered Biggles.

"Aerodrome 137 should be a little to the north. I'm going to try to find it. We shall

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have to make a landing sooner or later because, as I said before, there's a limit to what we can see from up here. If we can prove that hashish or gurra is being cultivated we should be justified in taking any steps to stop it. But we must see the stuff first, or we may find Ambrimos going for us in the courts for heavy damages if we injured his property—or his reputation."

Chapter 7

Nature Intervenes

THE finding of the old war-time aerodrome 137 turned out to be a more simple job than Ginger expected. He had supposed that after the lapse of time all signs of it would have disappeared, except of course the actual landing area, which, as much of the surrounding country was flat anyhow, would not be conspicuous. He was more than a little

surprised,.

therefore, when he observed a labyrinth of zigzag lines that quite obviously had been military trenches. Following the general direction of these with his eyes he picked out a line of old gun-pits, and some way beyond them, near some scrub, three temporary hangars of camouflaged fabric which appeared from the distance to be as sound as on the day they were erected. He pointed them out to Biggles who at once turned towards them.

As the machine, losing height, drew near, it became evident that the first appearance of good condition was an illusion caused by distance and overheated air. They were in fact in just such a state as might have been expected after years of exposure to sun and storm without any attempt at repair. One had collapsed, and another had a definite list. From all three, much of the canvas, in easy reach of the ground, had been removed, presumably by natives who must

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have regarded as a god-send this ample supply of material from which tents could be made.

Twice Biggles flew round the site examining the ground closely for possible obstructions. Then he remarked: "I think we might have a closer look. That hangar might suit us as an advanced base from which to make a sortie on Ambrimos's plantations. This is no country in which to leave a machine standing too long in the sun—moreover, for all the world to see.

I'm going down."

Suiting the action to the word, he glided in and landed, afterwards running on to the dilapidated sheds. He made a brief examination of them from where he sat and then taxied slowly into the shade provided by the one in reasonable repair. He then switched off, and in a sultry, depressing sort of silence, Ginger followed him to the ground.

Signs of the purpose for which the structure had been used were at once apparent on all sides. Anything portable or of value had of course been salvaged by natives, but there was still a fair amount of

junk lying about—empty oil drums, flattened petrol cans, torn canvas, scrap metal, waste packing material, and even a rusty Bofurs gun. Signatures and remarks, mostly of a sarcastic nature, had been daubed on the canvas that still clung to the metal girders—the inevitable result of military occupation. The writing was in French, Italian and English, revealing the nationalities of the troops who had fought their way through the land during the war. There was an amusing caricature of the ill-fated Mussolini.

Biggles smiled wanly. "Time marches on," he page 93

murmured. "Troops have fought over this ground since history began. This is the debris left by the last who passed by. Another year or two and it will be gone with the rest. No matter; for the moment it suits us. We could make a dump here and walk over to El Moab. I reckon it can't be more than ten or twelve miles away."

He turned to Zahar, who had followed them out of the machine and now stood regarding the dismal picture without emotion. "Have you been here before?" he asked.

The Arab replied that he had not.

"But you could find your way to El Moab?"

"Without doubt, Sahib, God sparing me," answered Zahar. "But such a journey should be made by night when the air is cool and the Danakils in their villages."

"These Danakils you think are really dangerous?"

"They are a misbegotten race whom God will one day hold to the reckoning," asserted Zahar

earnestly. "But they are good fighters, and should they see us they would try to deprive us of our lives."

"We could perhaps discourage them," observed Biggles, drily.

"What is written will come to pass," averred Zahar, resorting to his fatalistic philosophy.

"Very well," decided Biggles. "In that case we will return to Aden and make preparations." He turned to Ginger. "I shall have to let Raymond know what we're doing."

He was about to climb back into his seat when a low cry from Zahar brought him to a stop, and he turned, as did Ginger, to ascertain the cause. The

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Arab was gazing with shaded eyes through the open end of the hangar at something in the distance. At first Ginger could see nothing for the blinding white glare; but presently he made out a line of heat-distorted figures moving in the form of a column across the arid waste.

"What people are those?" Biggles asked Zahar.

"From the direction they have come, and as they travel with donkeys, they will be Danakils taking slaves to the sea for shipment to the other side of the water," announced Zahar. "It is an old trade which the English have tried to stop, but it goes on all the time," he added casually. *

"Where are they making for?" questioned Biggles. "For Marsa Mekel, doubtless," was the answer. "The Sahib will remember there was a dhow there. It will take them across the water if Allah delivers them from evil."

Half closing his eyes to reduce the glare Biggles gazed at the distant column. Ginger, too, watched it with some apprehension.

"They seem to be in a great hurry," observed Biggles.

"You have taken the words from my lips," declared Zahar in a curious voice. "Wallah! They must have received evil tidings." He climbed onto an oil drum for a better view. "Now here is something I

* The modern slave trade is not like the old. In north-east Africa natives often sell their children when about nine or ten years old, knowing that they will find life easier in wealthy Arabian households than in their own primitive settlements. They are rarely slaves in the sense that they are forced to do hard labour under a taskmaster. On the contrary, some are well cared for and often rise to important positions.

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do not understand," he went on. "The caravan has stopped."

"So I see," confirmed Biggles. "Isn't that a strange thing to do in the heat of the day?"

Zahar did not answer. Suddenly catching his breath he jumped off the drum and running outside turned to look at the sky behind the hangar. "There is no God but God," he cried. *

"What is it ? " asked Biggles sharply.

"A haboob is upon us, Sahib," answered Zahar calmly. "It is from Allah

may he be glorified! Now the behaviour of the Danakils is explained."

Biggles joined him and Ginger followed. For a few seconds neither spoke.

There was no need to remark on what was plain to see. From out of the north-east, racing towards them from the direction of the coast, and cutting them off from it, came a dark brown wall of sand, thousands of feet high. Above it the sky was no longer blue, but yellow.

"If Bertie got, caught in that, he's had it," said Biggles grimly.

"Couldn't he get above it?" asked Ginger.

"Not a hope. That grit may go up to twenty thousand feet. An engine sucks it in through the air intake—and if there's one, thing an engine won't stand for it's sand."

"What are we going to do about it?" enquired Ginger anxiously.

* This is the usual expression of astonishment employed by Arabs. It is not said in a blasphemous sense. The name of God is ever on the lips of the desert Arab who, from the life he lives, is constantly reminded of the power of the Almighty, and the futility of pitting his own puny strength against it.

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"We can't run away from it, that's certain," answered Biggles. "It would mean going west, in which case we should probably end up in the Sahara.

That sandstorm may travel hundreds of miles before it peters out. We can't travel hundreds of miles ; we haven't the petrol. I'd rather take my chance here, where Bertie at least knows where we are. He may not have left the ground yet. If he has, he'll see what's in front of him and turn back."

"It is the season of haboobs," put in Zahar without emotion.

"It's a bit late to remind us of that," returned Biggles.

"They come and go quickly."

"Let's hope this one goes quickly," muttered Biggles. "Meanwhile, we'd better start getting ready for it. Hark! What the ... "

All eyes switched upward as the distant hum of an aero—engine came through the quivering air. It was soon located, a tiny speck that moved against the background of infinite blue some way to the west of the approaching storm. The machine was heading southward, nose down, tail high.

" That must be Bertie, trying to run out of the dirt," opined Ginger.

Biggles did not answer for a minute during which time he kept his eyes focused on the speck. "That isn't Bertie," he announced at last. "That kite looks to me like an old Gipsy Moth."

"But who——? "

Biggles broke in. "That must be the Sultan's plane. I imagine that the fellow flying it is making

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flat out for his usual landing—ground at El Moab—trying to reach it before the sand gets there. He'll probably do it. He hasn't far to go.

But come on. Get cracking. Collect all the old canvas that you can find.

The important thing is to get the engine covered. Then we'll make a shelter for ourselves or we shall be grinding grit between our teeth for a week."

Ten minutes of feverish activity followed, with Zahar, who probably knew better than the others what was in store, slashing away long strips of canvas from the walls with his dagger. These were at first dragged over the nose of the aircraft and secured with thongs of the same material.

Then more canvas was thrown over some oil drums so that a space was left in the middle. Sand was piled on the edge of the canvas to hold it down.

The work went on until the first gust of air, travelling on the front of the storm, came moaning across the wilderness. Another gust sent sand flying and set the canvas flapping. Ginger gasped, for the air might have been coming from a blast furnace.

"Inside, everyone," ordered Biggles, and they scrambled into the cavity they had prepared. Zahar was better off than the others for he was able to wind his voluminous gumbez about his face. Ginger, following Biggle's example, tied his handkerchief over his mouth and nose. This done they lay flat and waited for the worst.

It arrived a few minutes later, and it lasted, at its height, as far as Ginger could tell, about an hour. He had no clear recollection of anything that happened.

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He certainly did not see anything for he did not dare to open his eyes.

The heat was appalling, and breathing a matter of no small difficulty. So he simply lay still with a great noise in his ears while a thousand shrieking demons seemed to clutch at the flimsy shelter. The world appeared to have turned to sand. It scoured his skin; it trickled down his neck; it got into his ears, his nose, and his mouth, in spite of all efforts to prevent it. It dried his lips and grated between his teeth.

Thirst consumed him. The desire to drink became a mania. But at length the roaring tide of sand and grit and dust passed on, and after a moaning aftermath gave way once more to the brooding silence of the wilderness.

He fairly gasped in his relief, although he knew there had never been any serious danger provided the hangar did not collapse on top of them, to choke them. But it was all very unpleasant.

After a while he felt Biggles stirring, so he, too, began to move, carefully, for at every turn more rivulets of sand ran down his neck.

However, he crawled out of the shelter and followed Biggles's example of shaking the worst of the sand from his person. The air was, of course, still laden with sand, and they looked at each other through a

gloomy yellow twilight. The sun was a misshapen orange globe. Zahar simply took off his gumbez and shook the sand out of it as if the storm had been no more than an ordinary passing incident—which to him, no doubt, it was.

Biggles fetched a water-bottle from the aircraft. They all rinsed sand from their mouths and drank with relief and satisfaction.

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"And now what?" asked Ginger, when their personal comfort had been more or less restored.

"Do you mean what are we going to do? "

"Yes."

"That's easily answered," asserted Biggles. "We're staying here." He jerked a derisive thumb upwards. " I'm not asking any engine to plough its way through that muck. We shouldn't get far, anyhow. We shall have to wait for the sand to settle, which means that we're going to be here for some time and there's just nothing we can do about it."

Ginger regarded the outlook moodily, for what Biggles had said was obviously true.

" Bertie will probably fly out to look for us," went on Biggles. "But if he's got any sense he'll wait for the atmosphere to clear. Somehow I don't think he'll have got caught in the storm. It must have been plain to see from a long way off and he'd keep clear of it. He'll be worried about us, no doubt, and he'll be out to look for us as soon as it's possible. Actually, I hope he stays where he is until we get back.

Meanwhile, we might as well make ourselves as comfortable as possible.

We're all right for water, so I don't think we have anything to worry about." He turned to Zahar. "What do you think about it?"

"It was ordained, Sahib," was all Zahar had to say.

Chapter 8

Ginger Falls Out

THE day passed slowly, with the air clearing somewhat as the storm-tossed sand settled again on the desert from which it had been wrenched.

Visibility improved, almost imperceptibly, as the result. When at length the sun sank into the distant jagged peaks of the Ethiopian Highlands it was in such a riot of colour, due to the dust particles that still hung in the atmosphere, that Ginger could only stand and marvel at it. Zahar, to whom the spectacle was nothing new, accepted it, as he accepted everything, with calm indifference. If Allah wanted such things as haboobs, well, it would be blasphemous to wish otherwise.

The cover remained on the engine cowl, making it evident that Biggles had no intention of flying. Apart from the risk of a forced landing with the prospect of a long march home across dangerous country, there was, he observed, no sense in ruining a perfectly good engine, by scouring its cylinders with grit, for no particular reason. The return flight could be deferred until the following day, by which time conditions would have returned to normal.

Bertie did not put in an appearance. He had, presumably, decided to stay on the ground for the same reason as Biggles—a decision with which no fault could be found. As Biggles remarked, for the moment he was better where he was, assuming that

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he was still at Aden. There was nothing he could do if he flew out, anyway.

When the moon, a monstrous globe of burnished copper, swung up over the horizon, Biggles served out water and iron rations from the store carried in the machine. While these were being consumed with a

certain amount of sand, which appeared to have got into everything—he opened a conversation with Zahar which revealed to Ginger the lines on which he had been thinking during the period of inaction.

"There seems to be no reason why we should sit here doing nothing," he began. "Sooner or later we shall have to make a reconnaissance from ground level to give this hashish factory the once over. As you say, Zahar, it would be silly to attempt such a trip in daylight, so it might as well be done tonight, while we're within striking distance. Could you find your way to El Moab without great difficulty?"

"Without doubt, God willing, O Sahib," answered Zahar without hesitation.

"But," he added, "if the men of Ambrimos see us, they will fall on us and despoil us."

"But you will go?"

"It is good hearing that you will take me with you," returned Zahar. "For at El Moab I hope to meet Abu bin Hamud, who, under God, I shall hold to the reckoning."

"It is not my intention to throw away our lives for the sake of a personal grievance," warned Biggles.

"But if I kill him, it will be a thing to be remembered," argued the Arab.

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"Should you fail, it will be Hamud who will have the joy of remembering,"

retorted Biggles.

"It will be as God wills," averred Zahar, with his indisputable logic.

Ginger put in a word. "What are we going to do when we get to El Moab? "

"That will depend entirely on what we find," replied Biggles. "Frankly, I'm not concerned overmuch with the hashish racket. That wasn't in our assignment, although, no doubt, the authorities will be glad to know about it. We were sent out here to stamp on the gurra traffic before it could get any worse; before it can grow to the size of the hashish trade, which would be bad for everyone except those employed in the business.

Someone, probably Ambrimos, has spotted the possibilities, and has set himself out to grow the stuff at a convenient spot with a view to establishing a monopoly. At any rate, that's how I see it. The only clue we have points to Ambrimos as the man, and El Moab, where he already has interests, as the source of supply. We may be barking up the wrong tree, and if that turns out to be the case we shall have to try somewhere else.

One thing is certain. Ambrimos has made it clear that he wants us—and that includes Zahar—out of the way. That may merely be on account of the hashish racket. We shall see—tonight, with luck. To get down to brass tacks, I'm hoping to find a nursery bed of young plants—they can't have grown to full-sized bushes yet."

"And suppose we do find the stuff growing at El Moab?"

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"The entire stock will have to be destroyed."

"How? "

"If the plants are too small to burn we'll pull them out of the ground one by one."

"There is no God but God," burst out Zahar, in a voice which told the others with what little hope of success he regarded such an operation.

Ginger, too, looked doubtful. "That sounds a fantastic business to me."

"Can you think of any other way?" enquired Biggles.

"No."

"If we leave one plant Ambrimos will save the seeds and start all over again somewhere else."

"I suppose so," agreed Ginger moodily.

"The size of the job will depend on the size of the area we find under cultivation—supposing the stuff is there," Biggles continued.
"Naturally, I'm thinking in terms of square yards, not miles."

"I'm glad to know that," answered Ginger with a tinge of sarcasm.

Biggles went on. "We haven't as much water left as I would like for a show of this sort. Owing to that infernal storm we've used more than we should, and in a country like this water is about the one thing a man can't do without."

"In that matter, Sahib, there is no need to fear," put in Zahar. "On our way, we shall pass a narrow wadi in which there should be water in abundance, a stream that overflows from the lake which the Sultan has made to store water for the dry season. The stream dies at a water hole which

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I have seen but not used. You can fill the bottles there."

"That's good news," declared Biggles.

"What about the machine?" queried Ginger. "Will it be safe here?"

"We shall have to chance it. I shouldn't think many people pass this way in daylight, and the machine is pretty well out of sight in the hangar.

We shouldn't be away very long."

So it was agreed, and an hour later the expedition set out across a wilderness made even more melancholy by the dim light of a moon still half obscured by dust. Visibility was fairly good, however, and improving all the time as the sand settled.

For the first part of the journey there was nothing to break the monotony. The travellers marched almost in silence. The only sound that came from the outer darkness was the occasional ghoulissh screaming—

sometimes called laughing—of a hyena. The blood-curdling noise was singularly appropriate to the setting, thought Ginger.

Zahar seemed to be in no doubt as to his course although there was no track of any sort. A surprising number of bones of animals long dead, pale objects on which the moon gleamed with an uncanny significance, littered the landscape. The going varied considerably as the party crossed flat areas of wind-polished stones or zigzagged up an eminence in which the bed-rock lay exposed. Detours were made round patches of scrub, and twice Zahar called a halt while he sought for the easiest way of crossing a wadi. Over all hung a sense of heaviness, a heart-chilling lone-page 105

liness, as is usual in desert countries as yet unaffected by the handiwork of man. The air was still, and the heat of the day gave way to a refreshing coolness. But there was still a certain amount of sand in the atmosphere which inevitably found its way into the mouth and nose to awaken the demon thirst.

Knowing the rule about not drinking while on the march Ginger refrained from touching his water bottle, but he was more than a little relieved when at long last Zahar announced that they were approachhing the water hole which he had mentioned. Presently he asked the others to wait while he went on to confirm that it was not already occupied by travellers who would almost certainly be enemies. Fortunately there was no one there, so they all scrambled down a stony bank to the water, a mere trickle that ended in a stagnant pool perhaps half a dozen yards across. To Zahar, such an ample supply of water was a thing to wonder at, and he gave repeated thanks to God as he filled his water bottle. From sheer habit, perhaps, he did not drink. Biggles took a sip and spat it out with an exclamation of diss gust. "I wouldn't touch it unless I really needed it,"

he told Ginger. "You'll probably find a dead camel lying in it higher up." As a precaution against emergency, however, he topped up his water bottle.

Ginger was too thirsty to accept his advice. He drank a little. The water was definitely brackish, as is most desert water, due to the salt in the sand. After he had finished drinking he also discovered that page 106

a sweet, musty flavour was left on his tongue. Actually, however, he swallowed very little, for the most part contenting himself with

rinsing out his mouth.

After a brief halt the march was resumed.

It was about twenty minutes after this that Ginger began to feel unwell.

For a while he said nothing, hoping that the spasm of nausea from which he suffered would pass off. It did not. On the contrary, it became worse, and so he was at length compelled to reveal his condition to Biggles.

"I'm sorry," he said, " but I feel as sick as a dog. I'm giddy, too. I don't think I can go on."

Biggles stopped. "That sounds as if you've got a touch of the sun," he diagnosed. "You've chosen an awkward moment to fall sick."

Ginger sank down on a rock mopping cold perspiration from his face. "I feel pretty awful," he asserted. "I think perhaps I'd better start back."

"Start back! Are you out of your mind?" demanded Biggles with asperity.

"What a hope you'd have of finding your way. You'd be lost before you had gone a mile. If you can't carry on you'd better stay where you are and we'll pick you up on the way back."

"Okay," agreed Ginger miserably. "Maybe the feeling will pass off when I've had a rest." And in view of the outcome of this apparently simple incident it must be stated that he really believed what he said. And what was perhaps even more disastrous, Biggles thought so, too. At all events, it was plain from Biggles's manner that he did not suppose Ginger to be suffering from anything worse than

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a passing indisposition—probably, as he said, an attack of sickness due to the heat during the day.

Even so, Biggles hesitated. " Maybe we'd better call the whole thing off and concentrate on getting you back to the machine," he suggested.

Naturally, Ginger protested at this. He recoiled from the idea that the sortie should be abandoned on his account. "I shall be all right," he insisted.

"You're quite sure?"

"Positive."

"All right," consented Biggles. "But whatever you do don't move. I mean, if the attack passes off, and you feel better, don't try to follow us.

You'd probably miss us in the dark. Stay here and we shall know where you are."

"Fair enough," agreed Ginger weakly.

"We shan't be long," said Biggles encouragingly as he turned away. "We must be pretty close to El Moab. We'll have a quick look round and come straight back. Keep quiet."

Ginger nodded assent and lay back. The fact was, he was now feeling a good deal worse than he had led Biggles to suppose. In this, considering the circumstances, he was at fault, as he was very soon to realise. He should have made his condition plain, in which case the events that followed would have been very different from what they were. For had he said that he felt desperately ill, which was the simple truth, it is unlikely that Biggles would have left him alone in such a place—or anywhere else for that matter. Of course, Ginger's behaviour was under-page 108

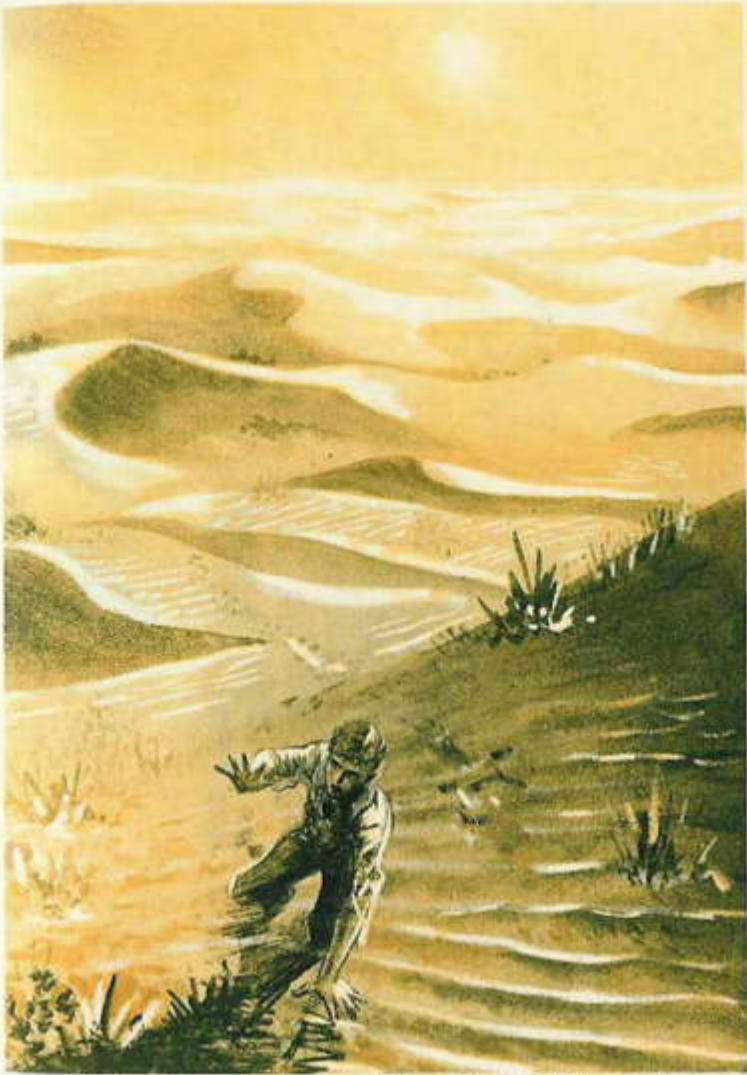
standable. He could not bear to think that physical weakness on his part should result in the failure of the expedition.

He told the truth in one respect. He said he thought the worst had

passed. He really thought it had. It did not occur to him that this was the onset of something far more alarming. Having always enjoyed good health he could not imagine what was wrong with him; and the fact that something was wrong only served to irritate him. But this aspect of the matter was forgotten, to be replaced with real fear, as illness beyond his experience took him in its grip. Cramp racked his stomach. He thought he was dying, and so dreadful was the process that he hoped it would soon be over. Or was it all a nightmare? He did not know. He was no longer sure of anything. The moon began to swing about in the sky. The immediate landscape of rock and sand that formed the wadi took on strange colours, and began to pile up before him like a mountain. Time stood still. It no longer had meaning. This frightful thing had been happening to him for ages of time. He had never known anything else. Memory failed.

He tried to rise, but found that he had lost the power of movement. His bones and muscles had turned ,to jelly. Then he became two people, one in the throes of delirium and the other watching. An icy chill began to creep through his limbs. He was violently sick, and this brought a brief respite. Somewhere near at hand a hyena started its diabolical yowling.

He could see the beast. It split into a hundred parts, each part to become another hyena.



Reeling like a drunken man Ginger blundered blindly into the desolation.

The moon was falling on him. The instinct of self-preservation awoke.

With an inarticulate cry he scrambled to his feet and reeling like a drunken man blundered blindly into the benighted desolation.

UNAWARE of Ginger's desperate plight Biggles walked on, keeping close behind Zahar who automatically took the lead. They kept to the bottom of the wadi, which now became broad and shallow, rather than risk exposing themselves now that they were drawing near to their destination. The Sultan's men, said Zahar, might be moving about, collecting fodder for their animals, or perhaps looking for one that had strayed.

The almost dry river bed was by no means easy going. It was strewn with boulders of all shapes and sizes, with occasional patches of acacia shrub, a bush that bristles with thorns.

Several times as they advanced Biggles passed his tongue over his lips, puzzled by a slight stickiness that formed on them. This had, moreover, a peculiar spicy taste, although not altogether unpleasant. Curiously enough, he did not connect this with the water he had tasted—not that there was any particular reason why he should. Even when, a little later, he experienced a momentary twinge of nausea, he put it down to an adulterant in the condensed meat paste, a tin of which he had opened from the store carried in the aircraft. He recalled that Ginger had eaten rather more of it, while Zahar had had none, such viands being forbidden by his religion. The implication was

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too obvious to be overlooked, and Ginger's sudden attack was explained—or so he thought. Ginger, he was now convinced, was suffering from food poisoning, and as this can be a dangerous disorder he regretted that he had left him. Indeed, for a moment or two he contemplated going back, but having got so near the objective it seemed a pity to return without so much as a glance at the enemy camp. Rather worried, he walked on, wishing that he could move as silently as did Zahar over the loose stones.

The first sign that they were nearing their journey's end came when, from no great distance ahead, there occurred that queer piercing sound, common enough in the desert, that a camel makes when it is grinding its teeth, thought to be a call to its companions. Zahar

stopped at once, staring into the darkness; and as they stood there, listening, a donkey brayed.

"We have arrived at El Moab," announced Zahar in a low voice. "What is your intention, Sahib? remembering that we are now in the hands of Allah—

may he be glorified."

"My intention is to find out what happens here," answered Biggles. "In particular, I would know if it was to this place that Hamud brought the seeds that were gathered in the Wadi al Arwat. If there is danger I will go on alone, so that should evil befall me you can go back and carry the tidings to my friends."

"Wallah! Am I a jackal to be hiding in a wadi when there is men's work to be done?" protested Zahar. "I know my way about this place, so surely it is better that I should go with you? "

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Biggles did not argue the point. "As you wish," he agreed. "Upon your own head be it."

"May my face be blackened if I fail you," said Zahar. "Let us go on. This is a thing to be remembered."

"You never said a truer word," averred Biggles, whose feet were aching from the rough going.

He made his way cautiously to the lip of the wadi and looked over. From the elevated position thus gained he could see a good deal more than had been possible from the depression, for the wadi took a sharp turn, so that he was, as it were, on an escarpment, a sort of saddle-back, with the ground falling away both behind and in front of him. It seemed that the wadi, as it made the bend, also opened out somewhat, and it was in the shallow basin thus formed that the huts and tents of El Moab had been erected. The site had obviously been selected on

account of the trickle of water that ran through it.

Biggles spent some time studying the layout of the place. Not that there was much to see. There were two or three huts in the manner of a small military camp. One was fairly large. It was, explained Zahar, who had joined him, the house in which the manager lived. A huddle of black native tents stood a little distance beyond. Here, too, were some camels and donkeys, not tethered, but wandering at will. What lay beyond the basin—or, to give a more accurate impression, saucer—was not evident, for the wadi closed up again to a narrow rocky defile. It was across this, apparently, that a dam had been built, for above it, through a low place page 113

in the bank, moonlight glinted on a fairly extensive sheet of water.

Having completed his inspection of the general features of the place, Biggles moved on again, now with the utmost caution, with Zahar, dagger in hand, close by his side. Gradually the picture became more clearly defined. A smouldering camp fire came into view as someone blew on the embers, making it possible to see the outline of some natives who were seated around it. Others moved dimly in the back-page 114

ground, near the animals. Once, the silhouette of a camel's head and neck, grotesque in the wan light, appeared above the sky-line. The outline of the buildings hardened, and again it was moonlight that revealed an object which, had Biggles not been prepared for it, would have caused astonishment. It was an aircraft which he identified as a Moth, presumably the one that had been seen in the air. It now had a cover over the engine cowling and the wings and tail had been anchored with sand—bags. In that position, apparently, it had weathered the haboob. A faint, rather sickly yet aromatic aroma, had become perceptible.

Biggles touched his companion on the arm and said softly: "What can I smell? "

"Hashish," answered the Arab, He pointed to a long low hut that stood beside the rivulet that meandered down the centre of the wadi. "That is the house where the hashish is made," he went on.

Biggles looked at the manager's bungalow, a little way beyond. "What is the name of the man who lives there?" he asked.

"That I cannot tell you for I have never heard it; but he is, I think, from Egypt," was the answer.

As the camp seemed to have settled down for the night Biggles went on again, warily, with eyes alert for danger. He did not at first go down into the wadi, but remained just below the lip, taking care not to show himself against the sky-line. The lake that was the reservoir for the place came into view, and, at the nearer end, the dam that held the water in check. This was higher than he had supposed it to

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be, a matter of nearly twenty feet, which gave a clear indication of the considerable amount of water thus made available, although this would naturally diminish as the dry season advanced. The irrigation channels that carried the water to the land under cultivation could also be seen.

This comprised most of the ground in the bottom of the wadi not occupied by buildings.

Towards this area he now made his way, although as far as he could see there was not a crop of any sort. In a whisper he asked Zahar what he thought about it.

The Arab said that he thought there had recently been a crop of the hemp from which hashish is derived. This had been cut, and was now, judging from the smell, in the drying-room. No doubt the aeroplane had arrived to transport some of the finished product to Egypt.

This explanation seemed so reasonable that Biggles accepted it without question, and in the event it proved correct. Nevertheless, as this was the area with which he was most concerned—the real reason for his visit, in fact—he moved still nearer to confirm it. The change of position was made without alarm. So secure from prying eyes, presumably, did the Sultan consider his plantation, that he did not bother to post sentries.

Admittedly, Biggles told himself, it was not the sort of place where a European was likely to go in the ordinary way. Natives did not matter.

He soon learned all he needed to know. The hemp crop had been harvested.

That is to say, the leaves had been gathered and the unwanted stalks left on the ground. In one place, however, the earth had been page 116

cleared and tilled, and a close investigation showed that a new crop had just been planted. The plants were small, and they were not hemp. They were gurra, in the form of seedlings a few inches high about a foot apart. Biggles pulled up one of the seedlings and held it to his nose.

That settled any doubt. The area concerned covered perhaps half an acre.

Now the difficulty of destroying such a crop was at once apparent. The plants were too spindly to burn collectively as they grew, even if they had developed enough rosin to make them inflammable. The alternative appeared to be, as he had said, to pull them out of the ground one by one; but the objections to this were obvious. In the first place, it was unlikely that such an operation could be carried out in one session. Many hours of time would be required. Yet it was no use half doing the job, for as soon as it was light the damage would be discovered. The young plants would be put back in the ground and some of them at least would survive. These would provide stock for others, over which a guard would be posted so that there could be no opportunity of repeating the performance. Biggles wanted to be quite certain of destroying every single plant so that not one remained. As the original plants had been burned at the Wadi al Arwat no fresh stock would be available from that source. Gurra, would, therefore, pass out of cultivation and so cease to be a menace.

Considering the matter, it occurred to Biggles that cultivation in the wadi could only exist by irrigation.

It followed that if the water supply failed the ground would dry out in a few hours, and the burning sun would consume the seedlings as effectively as if they had been thrown on a bonfire. The thing to destroy then, was the water-supply, and this appeared to offer no great difficulty. One well-placed charge of explosive in the dam would do all that was necessary. Even if the dam were repaired it would take a long time for such a quantity of water, as was now in the reservoir, to accumulate again. During that time the whole place would have to be evacuated, for there would hardly be sufficient water to keep men and animals alive.

Discussing the matter with Zahar, the Arab gave it as his opinion that the trickle of water in the bottom of the wadi would dry up altogether before the end of the hot season. The rains were now past. It would not rain again for many months.

That, really, was as much as Biggles wanted to know.

It was Nicolo Ambrimos, the Sultan of Aden, who was trafficking in the new narcotic. It must have been he who had sent Hamud into the desert to collect seeds of the plant, and murder his companions so that there could be no witness. It was he who was now growing a large stock of gurra at El Moab. Fortunately, one charge of high explosive might well destroy the lot. All Biggles wanted was the explosive, and that could soon be obtained in Aden, or from the nearest Royal Engineers' Depot.

Well satisfied with his night's work he crept away as silently as he had approached. There had been no alarm. Indeed, the whole operation had been

carried out with much less difficulty than he had expected. All that remained to be done was to collect Ginger and get home.

The thought of Ginger, who, in his interest in El Moab, he had for the moment forgotten, caused him to hasten. If it turned out that Ginger was really ill, a serious complication would arise, for it would be no easy matter to get him back to the aircraft. With this thought on his mind it was almost at a run, that, once clear of the camp, he returned to the spot where Ginger had been left. Reaching it he stopped, looking about him.

"Ginger," he said quietly. There was no answer.

"Ginger, where are you?" he said again, raising his voice slightly.

Still no answer.

Biggles looked at Zahar. "This is where we left him, isn't it?"

"This is the place," confirmed Zahar.

Biggles made a swift circle round the area, whistling softly and calling Ginger by name. But there was no response. He returned to Zahar. "I don't understand this," he said in a puzzled voice.

"He is not here."

"I can see that."

"He went away."

"He would not go away because I told him to remain here, and he obeys my orders," declared Biggles.

"Then he was taken by force," stated Zahar. "But that could not happen without a noise. If

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he were attacked he would fight. There were no sounds of fighting."

"He may have been captured while he slept," offered Zahar.

"In which case, surely he would have been taken to El Moab, and we

should have heard talking and shouting?" argued Biggles. He bit his lip, utterly at a loss to understand what could have happened.

"It may be that he returned alone the way we came," suggested Zahar.

"I warned him not to do that, and because he obeys orders he would not do it," asserted Biggles positively.

"He is not here. Either he went by force, or of his own will," insisted Zahar, with cold logic.

Biggles sat on a boulder and tried to work the thing out.

Zahar dropped on his hands and knees and began examining the ground closely. He found the place where Ginger had lain, and a moment later sucked in his breath with a sharp hiss. "There is no God but God! " he gasped, in a voice of wonder.

"What is it? " asked Biggles tersely.

"Here he was sick."

"What about it?"

"He was sick because he had eaten hashish," declared Zahar.

Biggles did not answer for a moment. "Nonsense !" he exclaimed.

"He had eaten hashish, Sahib," repeated Zahar.

"I know this because I smell it. It is a smell not easily forgotten."

"But he would not do such a thing," almost choked Biggles.

"But he did it," insisted Zahar relentlessly. "Doubtless it was written."

"But where could he get the stuff?" asked Biggles, in a voice not far from exasperation.

"God is the knower."

Biggles drew a deep breath, for once absolutely at a loss.

Zahar was still prowling about. "That is the way he went," he averred, pointing a brown finger towards the desert. "I see his footmarks. The sands cannot lie. The hashish had deprived him of his senses."

"But tell me this, O Zahar. Where could he get hashish?" cried Biggles desperately.

Suddenly Zahar stood erect and slapped a hand on his thigh. He went quickly to the water hole, and plunging in his hand, raised the liquid to his nostrils. "It was here," he said simply. "He drank hashish."

"You mean there is hashish in the water?"

"Without a doubt. This water passes through El Moab. In the water has been washed the sheets on which the hashish was dried. That is the answer."

"So that's it," agreed Biggles wearily. "I drank a little and it made me feel sick. He drank more. What would be the effect?"

Said Zahar: "For a time he will feel ill. His brain will be in two pieces. He will wander about. Then he will fall down and sleep for many hours."

"We must find him," resolved Biggles. "Can you track him ? "

"No" answered Zahar. "On this stony ground it would not be easy to track a caravan in daylight. By night, to track one man is impossible. I am a man of the desert and this is the truth."

"Then let us see if we can find him," said Biggles. For two hours or more they searched diligently, but without success, or any hope of it. The moon set and utter darkness descended on the wilderness. "

"This is a bad place for us to be found in daylight, and we have far to go," reminded Zahar at last.

Biggles pulled up, baffled, impotent. To find an unconscious body in such country, in the dark, was manifestly a hopeless task. "There is only one way I shall be able to find him," he decided. "I will return with the aeroplane. When daylight comes, by flying low and covering much ground quickly, I shall see him." He could think of no alternative, although such a course would, he feared, ruin his plan. It would be impossible to fly so near El Moab without being seen, or at any rate, heard., That, inevitably would put the camp on the alert. But there was no other way.

Whatever the result, he could not abandon Ginger.

"There is nothing more we can do here," he said. " Let us go." He turned his face towards aerodrome 137.

It was a long weary walk back. The night died with tardy reluctance. Just before dawn, although he did not see it, he heard a light aeroplane purning its way overhead. Its course was from south to page 122

north, so he concluded that it was the Moth, now on its way to a rendezvous with a load of hashish. The sound passed on and the sullen silence of the great open spaces fell again upon the scene. At length the night died. The chilly dawn-wind swept eerily across the desolation. Dawn became day. The sun soared over the horizon.

Biggles plodded on. The sun rose higher and resumed its relentless scorching of the tired earth.

Zahar said not a word. It was life as he understood it, and, doubtless, life as God wished it to be.

With the airfield almost in sight the silence was suddenly broken by a shot and a bullet kicked up the sand a yard in front of Biggles's feet.

He dropped flat instantly, as did Zahar, for the attack was entirely unexpected. Had it succeeded, Biggles told himself morosely, he would have been to blame. But he was so tired that his early caution had given way to carelessness, in a country where carelessness can have fatal results.

He was by no means sure of the direction whence the shot had come.

Neither was Zahar. When it was not repeated, Biggles crawled to the top of the nearest rise. Not a soul was in sight. On all sides lay the wilderness, dreary and forlorn in its stark sterility. Pistol in hand, Biggles rose slowly to his feet, ready for action. Nothing happened.

"Come, O Zahar," he said in a tired voice. "Let us go on."

Chapter 10

Bertie Gets A Fright

IN the meantime, while events had been shaping themselves around El Moab, Bertie had not been free from anxiety, although this for the most part was not on his own account. He was afraid that Biggles and Ginger had been caught by the haboob.

There had been no difficulty about getting the sabotaged aircraft repaired. Service riggers and fabric workers had attended to it at once, so that in an hour or two the machine was ready to take the air. He had no intention of being left out of anything that was going forward on the other side of the Red Sea, over which he was soon flying with a song on his lips.

The ditty died abruptly when he observed the sandstorm sweeping across his front, blotting out both land and sky. He was too experienced a pilot to commit the folly of trying to fly over it. In any case there was no point in it, for the territory with which he was concerned lay within the affected area. So for a time he flew up and down, keeping at a safe distance from the storm, watching the sky for Biggles's machine, which he fully expected to see coming back. His anxiety grew as time passed without any sign of it, and he was at last compelled reluctantly to accept the explanation that Biggles had been caught on the ground, too far inside the path of the storm to escape from it. This is not to say that he feared

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Biggles and Ginger had lost their lives. He had too much faith in Biggles's ability for that. For skilful air pilotage consists not so much of flying an aircraft well in normal conditions as being able to cope with a sudden emergency should it arise; and it is in this that experience tells. But he did think that the machine, if it had not been caught on the ground, must have been forced down, with results more or less serious for the aircraft and its occupants. However, there was nothing he could do about it while the sand persisted in the atmosphere, so as his petrol was running low he had no choice but to return to Aden.

In point of fact, he was inclined to think that Biggles had reached his first objective and was on the ground when the haboob descended upon him before he could get clear, otherwise he would have received a signal by radio. In this surmise, as we know, he was pretty well correct.

Thereafter all he could do was kill time on the aerodrome until the atmospheric conditions returned to normal. As a matter of detail he flew out again in the late afternoon as far as the track of the storm, but to his chagrin, finding the hinterland still obscured by dust, he was again compelled to return to his base. By the time he got back it was nearly dark, so there could be no further attempt to locate Biggles until the morning. That Biggles was down was now certain, for he had long exceeded his petrol capacity. Bertie was concerned about the safety of Biggles and Ginger, but he was not seriously alarmed.

With the sabotaging of Biggles's machine still fresh in his mind he

decided to spend the night in the cockpit

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rather than risk a repetition of the trouble. And in view of what happened it seemed likely that such a plot was projected, although there was no means of confirming it. The affair did not get as far as that.

Having dined in the R.A.F. mess as a guest, during which time he thought the machine would be safe as there were still airmen moving about, he returned to the hangar in which the machine had been parked for the night. There, more than a trifle bored, he sat down to wait for the morning.

After the airfield had settled down for the night he moved his position to a softer seat in the cockpit. He knew, of course, that a headquarters guard was maintained; but he also knew that such a guard would not prevent a determined intruder from getting in. As the war revealed, to guard an entire airfield against trespassers, by reason of its extent, requires more men than can normally be made available. He could, of course, have asked the station commander to put a special guard over his machine, but he felt that he had already made a nuisance of himself.

Moreover, such a request might create an impression that he was nervous, a supposition which, naturally, he was prepared to go to some trouble to avoid.

The machine was parked facing the open entrance, which he was thus able to watch. The time passed slowly, as it always does in such circumstances, and he was half regretting that he had imposed upon himself such a tiresome task, when, just before dawn, silhouetted against the moonlight, he saw a native figure slip silently and stealthily round the corner. The inside of the hangar was, of course, in pitch darkness,

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so that it was not possible to see what the man was doing. Afraid that

some mischief might be done before he could prevent it, Bertie started to get out; but the Arab must have seen him, or heard a movement, for he bolted. Bertie had only the merest glimpse as he darted off in the direction whence he had come. He hurried to the entrance but the intruder had disappeared. Nor did he return.

The stars were now paling in the sky so Bertie made no attempt to rest for fear of over-sleeping. In any case, his anxiety about Biggles and Ginger was such that he was in no mood to relax. So, without haste, he made ready to take off.

By the time the false dawn was lighting the east with its pallid glow he was in the air, on a course for aerodrome 137, the only definite objective that he knew where Biggles might be found. He hoped he would find him there, but he was in some doubt about it. Crossing the narrow arm of the Red Sea he began in the growing light to scan the ground in case Biggles had been forced down by engine trouble—a likely enough event should the machine have been exposed, even for a short time, to the dust-laden air. But he saw nothing of it, and in due course made out the weather-worn fabric hangars of the abandoned airfield. After flying round it once or twice he landed to see if there were any signs of Biggles's occupation. Actually, apart from the fact that there was no sign of the aircraft, he knew by this time that Biggles was not there; had he been, he would have heard him and shown himself. He observed that two of the hangars were pretty well flat, so he wasted no time page 127

on them. The other was somewhat askew, but he taxied his machine into it to keep it out of sight while he looked around.

All he found was the stub of a recently-smoked cigarette, of the brand which Biggles habitually used. It was not much, but it did at least tell him that Biggles had landed there; and had, moreover, been there after the haboob had passed, for although the cigarette end lay in the open it was clear of sand. Everything else was under a thick film of dust.

Unfortunately, this small clue could give him no indication of where Biggles had gone, which was, of course, what he wanted to know. He could only assume that Biggles had survived the haboob and was now making an air reconnaissance of the area. At all events, he felt pretty certain that Biggles had not gone home, or he would have seen him. It

was likely that he would have received a radio signal to that effect. The absence of such a signal puzzled him not a little. If Biggles's machine was in the air why hadn't Ginger spoken to him? There seemed to be no need for wireless silence.

Polishing his monocle mechanically Bertie considered the matter, not knowing what to do next. If, as he supposed, Biggles was making an air survey of the district, it was obvious that, at the end of it, he would do one of two things—possibly both. He would either fly straight back to Aden or return to aerodrome 137. Even if he decided to return to Aden there seemed a possibility that he would look in at the old aerodrome on the way on the off—chance of him being there. Reasoning thus, Bertie decided that the best

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thing he could do was stay where he was—for a little while, at any rate.

If Biggles did not put in an appearance within the next hour or so he would return to Aden and wait for him there. He was tempted to make a reconnaissance on his own account, but in the end decided against it in case such a course should interfere with whatever Biggles was doing. The sun was now up, so he moved back into the deep shade of the hangar beside his machine to await events.

He had cause—or he thought he had cause—to congratulate himself on his reasoning, when, about twenty minutes later, he heard the drone of an aircraft approaching from the south. Naturally, at first it did not occur to him that it could be anyone but Biggles, and he was about to run into the open to greet him when, to his unbounded astonishment, he observed that the machine was a Moth. Taken aback, he remained where he was, watching; and as he watched the engine died, and the nose of the machine tilted down in a way that told him beyond any doubt that the pilot intended to land. What such a machine was doing in such a place and at such a time was beyond his comprehension, so it was with no small interest that he adjusted his eye-glass to await the solution. He noted, with another twinge of surprise, that the aircraft carried neither civil registration letters nor military insignia.

The Moth landed, but instead of stopping in front of the hangars, as might have been expected, the pilot taxied on beyond the end hangar and so out of sight. The engine stopped. A moment later there came a clang of metal. After that, silence.



The man whipped out a revolver and fired it over the fuselage.

Wondering not a little at this strange behaviour Bertie strolled along the line of hangars to see what was happening. Not for an instant did it occur to him that he might be in danger. Pilots of all nationalities are at heart a friendly brotherhood, and if he thought about the matter at all, he supposed that his appearance would be greeted with, if not open arms, fraternal pleasure.

When he came in sight of the Moth he saw that the pilot had left the cockpit and was busy at something on the far side of it. Drawing nearer he saw to his astonishment that he was working a hand pump; that he was, in fact, in the act of filling his tank from an underground supply, a small man-hole cover having been removed for the purpose. Actually, Bertie was not so much surprised that a quantity of fuel had apparently been left behind when the airfield was abandoned, as by the fact that this wandering pilot should know of its existence. Drawing still nearer he saw that the man—who still had not noticed him—was not a European. His skin, even allowing for sun-tan, was too dark. Not that this made any difference as far as he, Bertie, was concerned. To him a pilot was a pilot, whatever his colour or nationality. From a distance of perhaps a dozen paces he hailed the Moth pilot cheerfully. "Hallo there! " he greeted, from the opposite side of the aircraft.

The result was quite outside his calculations. The man started violently, as if caught in the act of committing a crime. With a quick intake of breath he whipped out a revolver and fired it over the top of the fuselage.

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Bertie was nearly caught napping, as the saying is; but not quite. The man's expression warned him that he was not welcome, so that he, too, was ready to move quickly. The instant the revolver appeared above the fuselage he side-stepped smartly, with the result that the bullet came nowhere near him. His own automatic was out in a moment, although even now his purpose was defence rather than attack. For the same reason he backed away hurriedly. Thinking that the man must have mistaken him for someone else, he shouted: "Hi! Hold hard there! What's the matter with you? I don't bite."

The reply was another shot, fired this time under the fuselage.

Bertie continued to back away, keeping the machine between them and watching the man's feet which he could see below the fuselage. The truth of the matter was, apart from not knowing what to make of this behaviour he didn't know what to do about it. He had no desire to kill a man whom he did not know even had this been possible. A corpse on his hands was the last thing he wanted. Nor, on the other hand, was he prepared to be a corpse if it could be prevented. He was more irritated than angry, although anger was not far away. It was with relief, therefore, that he perceived that the belligerent pilot had apparently resolved to cease hostilities. The man swung up into his cockpit, switched on, and eased the throttle open with the obvious intention of taking off. This suited Bertie well enough; and had the fellow been content to leave it at that he would have saved himself a lot of trouble. But evidently page 131

he was not. As the Moth began to move he took another snap-shot at Bertie, holding the revolver in his left hand. This was going too far.

The bullet, as might be supposed considering how it was fired, went wide; but it caused Bertie's simmering anger to boil over.

"You confounded cad!" he called shrilly. "All right! Two can play at that game, yes, by Jove!" He then opened fire on the nearest wheel of the aircraft, more in the hope of speeding the pilot on his way than with any serious expectation of hitting his mark. As it happened, he did hit it—or rather, he hit the tyre. There was a sharp hiss of escaping air. The machine slewed round and nearly tilted up on its nose before coming to an abrupt stop.

"Ha! ha! you blighter. How do you like that?" scoffed Bertie, and then stood, pistol at the ready, to see what the pilot would do next.

Apparently the man did not like it at all, for he evacuated his cockpit with alacrity. Naturally, he chose the side farthest from Bertie, so that for a few seconds it was not possible to see what he was doing. Bertie not liking the idea of offering himself as a stationary target, dodged towards the tail unit; but by the time he had reached it the man was a hundred yards away, running in the direction from which he had

come. In a moment or two he had disappeared over a slight rise.

"Silly ass!" muttered Bertie. He pocketed his pistol, and then, prompted by nothing more than idle curiosity, strolled on for a closer examination of the aircraft.

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The only thing of interest that he found was a small sack tied in the back seat, a sack that looked as if it might be full of sawdust. He prodded it with a finger and ascertained that the contents were soft.

Curious to know more about this unusual cargo, he took out his penknife and made a small incision. This disclosed a brown, earthy-looking substance. He extracted a little and rubbed it between his fingers. It had a smooth, oily, slightly sticky quality. He smelt it. A sickly, aromatic aroma gave him a clue to the truth. He had never seen hashish in his life so he could not be sure about it, but taking into account the locality, and what he already knew, it did not need much imagination to work out that here was a load of the prohibited drug on its way to Egypt.

Leaving the aircraft as it stood, for there was nothing he could do about it, he went back and examined the underground tank at which the Moth had been refuelled. There was not a lot of petrol left in it. Whether it was the remains of a war-time supply, or whether it had been put in by the hashish operators, he had no means of knowing. Not that he thought much about it. He replaced the man-hole cover and then walked back to the shade of the hangar to resume his vigil. He now felt pretty certain that Biggles had gone straight back to Aden, but as he was on the spot he decided that he might as well wait a little while longer in case he was wrong in this assumption.

Five minutes later he heard a shot in the distance.

It was not easy to locate the direction from which the sound had come.

Anyhow, as he was not involved

he paid no attention to it beyond keeping a watchful eye on the rise over which the Moth pilot had disappeared.

Shortly afterwards two figures came into sight. He recognised Biggles and Zahar, plodding like men who had travelled a long way. Ginger, he observed, was not with them, which worried him somewhat, for he feared that Biggles had been forced down in the desert and that Ginger had been hurt. Leaving the hangar he walked to meet them. "What ho!" he hailed.

"Why the foot work so early in the morning?"

Biggles did not answer. He was staring past Bertie at one of the collapsed hangars.

Bertie did not like the expression on his face.

"Here, I say, old boy, what's wrong?" he asked anxiously.

Biggles continued to walk towards the hangar. At last he stopped. He looked at Bertie and then pointed to the hangar on which his interest had been focused. "How long have you been here?" he asked.

"About an hour or so."

"Was that hangar like that when you got here?"

"Absolutely. Why? Do you think I pushed the bally thing over—if you see what I mean?"

Biggles nodded grimly. "I see what you mean all right," he muttered.

Bertie looked puzzled. "What about the hangar?"

"I don't care two hoots about the hangar," replied Biggles. "I'm worried about what's underneath it."

"What is underneath it?"

"My machine."

Bertie whistled softly. "Is it, by Jove! Blow me page 134

down! Too bad! I didn't know. I'm afraid it'll be more than somewhat bent."

"Of course you weren't to know," sighed Biggles wearily. "When I was last here that shed was standing up. I put my machine in it."

"I'm afraid you're going to have a beastly job trying to get it out," murmured Bertie sadly.

"I'd already worked that out," returned Biggles, with biting sarcasm.

He walked forward to the wreck. "Sand," he said, "that's what did it.

That infernal storm dropped more sand on the roof than it could carry and the whole thing caved in."

"I'm afraid you're right old boy, absolutely right," agreed Bertie sorrowfully. "That's the trouble with this beastly place. There's too much sand—too much altogether. They ought to take some of it to the seaside for the kids to play with. They'd love it."

"This is not the moment to be funny," Biggles told him coldly.

Bertie looked hurt. "It was just an idea—just an idea."

"Where's your machine?" enquired Biggles.

"In the other hangar. It's a bit cock-eye—the hangar, I mean—but it was the only one."

"The one I chose looked better to me," asserted Biggles. "Unfortunately there weren't enough holes in the roof for the sand to fall through." He pointed to the Moth, still standing where it had stopped. "Who did that?"

It wasn't here last night."

"I did it," replied Bertie. "I mean, I helped the bloke who was flying it."

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"What do you mean—you helped?"

"Well, I shot a little hole in the tyre. That sort of —er—stopped it."

"I see. Why shoot a hole in the bloke's tyre?"

"He shot at me."

"So you've been having fun whilst my back was turned?"

"He started it," declared Bertie. "There s some petrol over there. He landed and started refuelling. I merely strolled over to say what cheer and he pooped off his pistol at me. Naturally, I pooped back at him."

"And then what?"

Bertie gave an account of what had happened. "Now I get it," remarked Biggles, at the finish.

"It must have been your Moth pilot who had a crack at us as we were walking home. No doubt he was on his way back, on foot, to El Moab."

"Which reminds me. What have you been up to?" asked Bertie.
"Where's Ginger?"

"Ginger," answered Biggles "is wandering about somewhere in the desert.

We've spent half the night looking for him. I was hoping he'd found his way here." He explained what had happened. "I shall have to take your machine to look for him, he concluded. He walked right up to the collapsed hangar and examined it closely. "There's a chance that this may not be as bad as it looks," he observed. " Of course if one of the metal roof supports has fallen across; a wing, with the whole weight of sand on it, the machine's finished. But looking at it, from the way the framework has crumpled up, that may

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not have happened. But it's no use guessing. I'm going in to have a look.

Stand fast."

So saying he climbed on the sagging fabric and with his knife cut a long slit in it. Through the aperture thus made he disappeared from sight in a river of sand.

Chapter 11

Biggles Takes A Ride

WHILE Biggles was under the sagging fabric the others could only guess from sounds what he was doing. What he had said, that there was room for hope, was obviously true, for the canvas had not fallen completely flat.

The framework had not snapped off short; rather had it been bent, borne down by the weight of sand that had collected on the roof, so that the hangar resembled more a room full of furniture over which had been spread a large sheet.

After some few minutes Biggles reappeared, and climbed out, shaking quantities of sand from his clothes. "It isn't too bad," he announced.

"At any rate, I don't think any serious damage has been done, but before the machine can be got out it'll be necessary to cut away at least two girders. They are all buckled up and are jammed one each side of the airscrew. The fabric offers no difficulty. It's rotten, and we can cut it away with our knives. To clear the metal work, though, will require an acetylene cutter, or a hacksaw. An acetylene cutter would soon do the job."

He sat down and thought for a minute or two while the others remained silent. "I'll tell you what, Bertie," he said at last. "I haven't time to tell you the whole story, but I've been to El Moab. The gurra is there.

The place is twelve miles or so from

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here, in that direction." He pointed. "The problem is to know the best way of dealing with the plants. It would be a long and tedious job to pull them up by the roots. I don't think that would be practicable anyway. There's an easier way of wiping the whole stock out. Close to the place where it grows there's a big reservoir of water held up by a dam.

If that dam was knocked down the rush of water would sweep the plantation out of the ground—the earth, as well as the plants, I reckon. To blow the dam, all that's needed is a charge of explosive. A few sticks of dynamite would do the trick because, from what I could see, the thing is only a home—made affair. I want you to go back to Aden. See the senior Engineer Officer. Tell him what we aim to do and ask him to let you have what is necessary. If he jibs, make a signal to Raymond and ask him to radio the necessary authority. That's one thing. Next, ask the Station Commander to lend you an acetylene welder or a good fitter who knows his job. Explain what's happened here. Fly him out and we'll get him working on this hangar. While you're in Aden you might also try to pick up a spare wheel, or tyre, for that Moth. There should be one about. The idea, if we can get one, is to fly the Moth out, complete with its load of dope and hand it over to the proper authority. Is that clear?"

"Absolutely, old boy. Three things. Dynamite, an acetylene cutter and a spare tyre."

"That's it."

"What are you going to do ? "

"I shall have to wait here," answered Biggles.

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" What about Ginger? "

Biggles hesitated. "I hadn't forgotten him. He's the snag in my scheme.

Your machine can't do two jobs at once. If I keep it here, you can't go home. If you go home, I can't use it. I want those things from Aden right away. That Moth pilot is now going hot-foot to El Moab, and when he gets there, the tale he'll have to tell will bring the enemy along in force to mop us up. The Sultan's manager will also be anxious to save the hashish in that Moth. So there's no time to waste."

" Couldn't I have a look round for Ginger first?" "If you did, it would probably put the lid on the whole show. That dam has got to go up, and the job will have to be done tonight or we may never get another chance.

If anything happens to me, you carry on with it. Ginger shouldn't take any harm for an hour or two. Zahar says he'll fall asleep, and when he wakes up most of the effect of the drug will have worn off. There's just a chance that in daylight he may be able to find his way back here on foot. He's seen the country from the air, so he must know the general direction. If he doesn't turn up, I'll go and look for him as soon as you get back. Tonight we'll tackle El Moab and clean the place up."

"Okay, old boy, as you say," agreed Bertie. "I'll push along and I won't linger on the way." With a wave he turned to the hangar in which he had parked his machine.

Biggles and Zahar watched him take off, after which Biggles returned to the hangar under the ruins

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of which his machine had been buried, feeling not a little annoyed that, having survived the storms of years, the structure should choose this particular moment to collapse, and so make things more difficult than they would have been otherwise. However, the thing had happened, and the only way to put matters right was the plan he had suggested. Rather than waste time doing nothing he enlarged the hole in the fabric and went inside again, firstly to get some food and water from the lock—up, and, secondly, to decide on the exact place to start work when the cutting equipment arrived. Zahar followed him in, slashing holes in the canvas with his dagger to let in more light and air.

Having satisfied his appetite Biggles spent some time, again with Zahar's assistance, cutting away such fabric as might impede the work of salvage when the metallcutting appliances were available. It would have to be cut away eventually, anyhow. It was also necessary to remove large quantities of sand which caused it to sag. It was warm work as the sun increased in power, and from time to time he went outside for a breath of air which, while hot, was at least fresh. Zahar, to whom heat meant nothing, went on working.

It was during one such interval that a shout brought Biggles round to face the direction of El Moab. A small group of native horsemen had appeared suddenly from somewhere and were galloping towards him. It was obvious that they had seen him so there was no point of trying to hide; but he spoke swiftly to Zahar who, fortunately, was still out of sight.

"Some horsemen are upon us," he said tersely. "Stay where



Biggles turned to face the horsemen—a wild-looking lot.

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you are, keeping still, and they will not know you are here. They have guns so we cannot fight them all. If they take me away with them, remain here, so that you will be able to tell my friend, when he comes, what has happened. You understand?"

"There is no God but God," came in a muffled voice from under the canvas.

"Tell my friend, when he comes, that I rely on him to destroy the wall that holds the water at El Moab."

"God sparing me it shall be as you say, Sahib," answered Zahar, without exposing himself.

There was no time for further conversation, so Biggles turned to face the horsemen, a wild-looking lot who, leading spare horses, did not steady their break-neck pace until the last moment, when they pulled their mounts to their haunches.

"Salaam aleikum!" greeted one—somewhat to Biggles's surprise, for the words mean 'Peace be unto you!'

"Aluikum salaam!" responded Biggles.

The man who had spoken urged his animal forward.

"Have you lost a man of your tribe, O Nasara?" he cried in a hoarse, guttural voice.

"I have," acknowledged Biggles.

"Stricken with sickness he rests in our menzil," announced the man.

"Where is your menzil?" asked Biggles.

The man made a vague sign towards the desert. "At what distance?" asked Biggles, although,

really, he knew the futility of the question. The desert Arab has little idea of time or distance in European terms.

"A short march," was the answer, which Biggles knew could mean anything.

"Will you go to him?"

"I will go," replied Biggles, without hesitation. "Will you show me the way and lend me a horse?"

"One was brought for the purpose," declared the man.

There was nothing more to be said. Biggles stepped forward and swung up on the back of the animal offered. The party at once moved off at a gallop.

The whole thing happened so quickly that Biggles had had little time to consider the step he was taking. Not—as he afterwards brooded—that it would have made much difference. The natives had really been in control of the situation from the moment they had seen him. At first he had felt quite sure that he was about to be attacked. The friendly greeting had disarmed him, so to speak, and by the time he had mounted he felt satisfied that the motive of the men in coming to see him, was genuine.

That Ginger was in their camp he did not doubt, for had they not found him they would have been unaware of his existence. In those circumstances he was bound to go to Ginger's assistance, so it came to the same thing in the end. The one weak point, the one thing that should have warned him to be prepared for treachery, he thought afterwards, was the curious fact of the leader of the party being able to speak English. That could hardly be coincidence. Obviously, he had been chosen for the job for that very reason. A man having no contact with Europeans, could hardly be expected to understand English, much less speak it.

These thoughts only occurred to Biggles when he had been riding for a little while. He observed with some misgivings that the direction they

had taken if maintained, would bring them to El Moab but still, as Ginger had been lost in that area, this was perhaps only to be expected. After riding for a time he asked the man who spoke English, for the man had kept close to him, if they were going near El Moab. The man did not answer, which, thought Biggles, looked bad. However, he was by this time too far committed to the venture to withdraw, even had he wished to do so. He could only console himself with the thought that if treachery was intended, Zahar would be able to tell Bertie, when he returned, what had happened. Not that Bertie would be able to do much about it beyond blasting the dam, which he could be relied upon to do.

Another hour and there was no longer any doubt in Biggles's mind as to their destination. They were riding straight for El Moab. He recognised some of the ground over which he had walked during the past few hours.

However, nothing could be done about it. There was just a chance that the Sultan's men at El Moab did not know who he was, who Ginger was, or what they were doing there.

It fell out as he expected. They rode straight into the encampment. A number of men who were standing about stared curiously as they galloped up. What had happened was now plain enough to see. Ginger had been captured. The pilot of the Moth had made his way back on foot to his starting point. He had reported the presence of a white man at page 144

aerodrome 137, and a party of natives had been sent out to bring him in.

He wondered if the pilot had been close enough to Bertie to recognise him; or rather, close enough to realise that the white man whom the natives had fetched from the airfield was not the man he had seen there.

On that occasion he had of course seen Bertie, not Biggles.

There was little time for conjecture. A man obviously of some authority appeared—an Egyptian, Biggles thought, judging from his features and the fez he wore on his head. He made a sign to the natives who closed in suddenly and laid hands on Biggles's person.

Biggles did not resist, perceiving that resistance would be futile. The man in the fez went through his pockets, removed his automatic, and with a smug smile put it in his own.

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"Come with me; my master wishes to speak with you," he ordered, and walked towards the door of the bungalow which Biggles had noticed during his moonlight reconnaissance.

Biggles followed the man in. He was in no case to argue, so he did not waste breath on questions or objections. Moreover, he was very anxious to know if Ginger was really there, for if he was not, if he was still out in the wilderness, he would by this time be in a bad way.

Having entered the house his guide turned into a room that led off from a small, bare hall. A man was standing there waiting, legs apart, his hands clasped behind his back. It was Nicolo Ambrimos, otherwise known as the Sultan.

This really did surprise Biggles. Such a possibility had not occurred to him. Knowing the type of man he was, he had assumed—without giving the matter any serious thought—that he rarely left his comfortable villa in Aden. Only in dire emergency would such a man face the austere conditions of the desert. This, presumably, was such an occasion. Besides, there was the time factor. How had he got there in such a short while? The Sultan had not only moved, but had moved fast.

Said Ambrimos, with a curious smile, rocking himself gently on his toes:

"Well, major, so we meet again?"

"You must have been fascinated by my personality to arrange another meeting so soon," returned Biggles, sarcasm in his voice.

The Sultan's smile broadened; but there was no

humour in it. "I was so anxious to see you that I risked my life in a flying machine to bring us face to face," he purred.

"Permit me to congratulate you on your courage," answered Biggles coldly. "But what to me is more important is the whereabouts of a young friend of mine who last night had the misfortune to fall sick and wander away from my camp. I was told he was here. I trust I was not misinformed?"

"What you were told was perfectly true," replied the Sultan. "He is here, looking rather sorry for himself. But please sit down. You must be tired after all your exertions." There was a sneer in the last sentence.

Biggles accepted the invitation, for he was, in fact, tired. "Where is this young man of mine?" he enquired.

"No doubt you would like to see him," was the answer. The Sultan said something, in a language unknown to Biggles, to the man who had brought him in. The man at once left the room. To Biggles, Ambrimos went on: "You see what comes of interrrfering with matters that are not your business, matters that you do not understand. Do you know what happened to this young fellow of yours? "

"I've a pretty good idea."

"He drank water without first informing himself of its quality—always a dangerous thing to do in the desert. In this case it happened to be somewhat polluted by certain industrial operations which I have undertaken here. Naturally, he was sick."

"In plain English, he was nearly poisoned to death page 147

by an overdose of hashish which you, regardless of the consequences to anyone else, had thrown into the wadi," said Biggles icily.

The Sultan shrugged. "That is a crude way of putting it, if you prefer it that way. But allow me to remind you that no one invited you to come here and drink the water."

"I must also remind you that water in the desert is the common property of all travellers, and only a man with the mentality of a diseased weasel would foul it," asserted Biggles caustically.

Ambrimos flushed. "In this case it happened to turn out to my advantage,"

he sneered, a rising inflection in his voice.

"It may look that way to you at the moment," admitted Biggles.

At this juncture, Ginger, still looking pale and shaky, was brought in.

He smiled wanly when he saw Biggles. "Sorry I've dragged you into this,"

he said apologetically.

"It may not be as bad as it appears," answered Biggles. "How are you feeling? "

"Pretty cheap."

"By the way," put in the Sultan, speaking to Biggles, "in case you have jumped to a conclusion, may I point out that this young man was in no way coerced into coming here. He came entirely of his own free will."

"Perfectly true," agreed Ginger. "But I think you should make it clear that at the time I was more than slightly doped, through no fault of my own, and cannot therefore be held entirely responsible for page 148

my actions. If you hadn't doped the water supply I shouldn't be here."

"A mere detail," purred Ambrimos. "The fact remains you came, and being delighted to see you we made you welcome. But let us not go into that.

Sit down and let us get to business. We have some serious matters to discuss—serious for me, I own, but more serious for you."

"I have nothing to discuss with you," said Biggles shortly.

The Sultan sighed. "Always so belligerent, you British. Never mind. Let us say I have things to discuss with you, and you would be well-advised to listen. And in case you should attempt to break off the conversation with the object of leaving El Moab, I must remind you that my men are outside awaiting the outcome of our talk. They do not like infidels at the best of times, and the knowledge that you have come here with the object of depriving them of their livelihood, has, quite naturally, done nothing to make them well-disposed towards you."

Biggles lit a cigarette. "Go ahead," he invited. "I'm listening."

Chapter 12

The Sultan Shows His Hand

By this time Biggles thought he had the situation summed up pretty well.

He had been watched in Aden. Ambrimos had been informed that the sabotaging of his aircraft had not produced the desired result, so he had followed him across the Red Sea, probably in the machine employed in the hashish racket. It must have been this machine which, with Ambrimos on board, had passed over aerodrome 137 just before the haboob broke.

Biggles's aircraft had been in the hangar at the time and had escaped observation, but Ambrimos must have known that it was somewhere in the vicinity of El Moab, and was therefore more or less prepared for the situation that had arisen. Ginger's sickness had played right into his hands.

The Sultan's manner suggested that he was well aware of this. He was obviously content with the way things had panned out and seemed to be in no great hurry to force a final show—down. Perhaps he thought that as he now held the trump cards, in the persons of Biggles and Ginger, the game was as good as over. Anyhow, with studied fastidiousness he selected a cigarette from a massive gold case, put it in a gold and amber holder, and with a flourish lit it from a gold petrol-lighter. The aroma of Turkish tobacco drifted sluggishly across the room.

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"You must understand, major, that I am a man of business," he remarked airily.

"I seem to remember you telling me that before," reminded Biggles coolly.

"With me business comes first, first and last and all the time," went on the Sultan, like a man who is saying something that he has said many times before. "I work very hard, doing my best to please everybody, yet always the British Government puts obstacles in my way. For which reason, as you will appreciate, I do not like your government. You provide an example. You were sent here to upset my business—don't deny it. Being human I'm bound to resent that. It is true that, among other things, I deal in a commodity which is always in demand in the Middle East."

"Say hashish and have done with it," suggested Biggles.

"Very well—hashish. What of it? I do not force my wares upon people. They demand them. I supply them, and by supplying them of course I make money."

"And at the same time make havoc of their lives," put in Biggles. "You don't care how many lives you wreck, how many homes you break up, as long as you make money. All right. Now let's get down to brass tacks. What's the point of this conversation?"

"The point is this," answered Ambrimos. "I have no intention of allowing the British Government, or that interfering body which it supports, called the Central Narcotics Intelligence Bureau, to ruin the business which I have spent my life in building. Whatever they do, human nature being what it is,

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I shall always be able to buy a road. I imagine you know the meaning of our expression, buying a road?"

"No. That's a new one to me."

"Buying a road is a nice way of saying that I am able to bribe officials along the routes by which my merchandise reaches its market. Everyone needs money, and this is money easily earned. A man has only to close his eyes for a few minutes, and Lo! his pockets are full of gold."

Biggles raised a critical eyelid. "Are you suggesting that I might earn my bread and margarine by this method? "

Ambrimos smiled sleekly. "You would then have butter instead of margarine."

"I'd rather have clean margarine than dirty butter."

The Sultan sighed. "Being a man of peace I always try peaceful methods first. I like you. There is a frankness, a directness, about the way you speak, that appeals to a certain softness in my own nature. I was hoping that you would consider it worth your while to accept an interest in my business."

Biggles shook his head. "Thank you," he said softly. "But that happens to be a bit of a road that is not for sale."

"Ah! a pity. Yes, a pity. A great pity. I have for some time needed a

good pilot. You know, of course, what happens to roads that refuse to be—

er—repaired? "

"Just as a matter of interest, tell me this," said Biggles curiously.

"Have you no fear that I might agree to your proposal, and then, having won your

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confidence, do a bit of selling myself—sell my information to the Narcotics Bureau, for instance? "

"No," answered Ambrimos. "That would probably be my way, because selling anything at a profit has always been a passion with me," he confessed, with startling frankness. "But you would not do that. The British are an obnoxious, meddlesome breed, but they have one characteristic which even we who hate them must admire. Having given their word they keep it. That, of course, although they do not seem to realise it, is their weakness. It is impossible to run a business on such lines and make it pay."

"We haven't done so badly," murmured Biggles.

"You would have done better had you been a little less squeamish in your transactions."

"Okay. Let's leave it at that," suggested Biggles.

The Sultan regarded him from under half-closed eyelids. "You realise that this refusal to co-operate forces upon me a painful alternative. Being a man of intelligence you will perceive that it would be folly on my part to allow you to go away and cause me further trouble?"

"How are you going to prevent it?"

"That is a plain question, and one that calls for a plain answer," returned the Sultan smoothly. "I shall have you put to death."

"That's plain enough," admitted Biggles.

"I hoped you would see it like that," said Ambrimos softly. "With you disposed of, I shall produce more and more hashish—and other things." The Sultan's pose of placid self-assurance began to break under the mounting anger which revealed his real character.

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Gone was the silky quality of his voice. It took on a hard, vicious tone.

"I hate you British," he went on. "I will break you and your Empire.

Sweet will be my revenge for the insults I have borne from your supercilious officials. Do you hear me? I will bring you into the dust, in spite of all your soldiers, your sailors and your airmen. British rule shall wither like a leaf in the desert, and it will be I, Nicolo Ambrimos, who will do this. Do you know how? Perhaps you can guess, for I know why you are here, what you seek. Gurra, the weed of Paradise. Yes, I have it. More and more will go to your miserable country of fog and rain.

It will flow into your factories to undermine the strength of your workers and turn them into useless human wreckage. Gurra shall do what guns and bayonets could not do. Your machines will turn to rust from idleness. You will lose the will to fight. Then you will fall, fall to a great power that is waiting for that day. After that, Europe will fall, and Asia, mighty Asia, will rise again."

To say that Biggles was surprised by this outburst would be understatement. He was amazed. This political angle was something new, something that he had not even considered. Ambrimos, in his anger, had let the cat out of its bag with a vengeance. Clearly, it was not only money that Ambrimos wanted. He wanted power. Here, pondered Biggles, was yet another would-be dictator burning to inflict his will on a world still suffering from the effects of the last one. He was planning to achieve his end, not with guns and bombs, but by drugs that would reduce whole nations to helplessness. Whether or

a plan could succeed was open to question, yet obviously it could do an immense amount of harm. Ambrimos was more than a racketeer. He was a fanatic and a dangerous one.

The Sultan was watching him. "Fantastic, you think, eh?"

"Fantastic is the word," agreed Biggles.

"But not so fantastic as you might think," declared Ambrimos. "Do you read history? Did you ever read of the conquest of Peru? Do you know why the Spaniard Pizarro, with a mere handful of men was able to conquer a nation of ten millions? Because the Incas had rotted their brains and muscles with the drug cocaine, which they obtained by chewing the leaves of the coca plant, until they had no will of their own and only the strength of little children. That is what Pizarro himself said, and he knew. The Incas are no more. Thus will it be with Britain, and the rest of your vaunted Western Civilisation."

Biggles smiled bleakly. "I see. So you're aiming to be a modern Pizarro?"

Ambrimos smiled a superior smile. "Pizarro conquered only one nation. I shall conquer many."

"And then what?"

"The world shall be set free."

Biggles shook his head wearily. "Don't give me that line of hooey," he said in a pained voice. "There are enough people already singing that tune. The more talk there is of freedom the less freedom people get. What people like you really want is to put more shackles on everyone so that you can tickle your vanity playing Lord of Creation. If you really want to do

people a bit of good, all you have to do is jump in the sea and drown yourself. In short, your real aim is to plunge the world into another war."

"Certainly not! I am a man of peace," declared Ambrimos.

Biggles drew at his cigarette and exhaled slowly.

"The old old story. You want peace so you start a war to get it. Either you're nuts or you must think other people are. If all you people who are so anxious for peace would pipe down, ordinary folk would forget that there is such a thing as war. They would then get on with the things they really want to do instead of hurting themselves by throwing things at each other. What have you got to moan about, anyway ? You've done yourself pretty well. But I know your sort. You tuck yourself in under the Union Jack because if you went anywhere else you'd get your throat cut. Then you turn round and bite the hand that protects you because it has something that you haven't got, and could never get. That something needs guts, not jelly, in its belly. Quit bleating, or else give me leave to go outside to be sick." .

The Sultan stared. His breath came faster. His face had taken on a curious pallor under its colour.

"Now I'll make a suggestion, a practical one," went on Biggles. "Tomorrow let us pull up all the gurra and burn it. Then I'll fly you back to Aden where you can live in comfort for the rest of your life as long as you drop the hashish racket and stick to dates and frankincense. No man ever gave you sounder advice than that."

Ambrimos continued to stare at Biggles. He

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moistened his lips. "I do not need advice," he said slowly.

"People who make statements like that usually end up where you'll

end up," said Biggles. "No man is as smart as he thinks he is and you're a long way short of it."

"So that's what you think?"

"It isn't what I think, it's what I know. Have it your own way. I have nothing more to say."

Ambrimos clapped his hands for his manager, who had left the room. When the man came Ambrimos looked at Biggles and pointed to the door. "Think over my offer," he invited. "Here we do nothing in a hurry. I'll give you a little while to change your mind." He made a signal of dismissal.

Biggles and Ginger were escorted from the room. The Sultan had not lied when he said that the men outside did not look upon Christians with favour. There was quite a crowd, every man armed, some with rifles of an obsolete pattern, some with spears. They were a barbaric-looking lot, evidently tribesmen from the interior. Biggles did not know enough about them to identify the types, but from what Zahar had told him he supposed some of them to be Danakils, and others, tribesmen from the Highlands of Abyssinia.

The appearance of the two white men was greeted with scowls, muttered vituperation, and a few shouts. There was some spitting. From this it was clear that only one word would have been necessary to cause murder to be done there and then. Ambrimos stood at his door, smiling, as the natives parted reluctantly

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to clear a path for the prisoners as they were taken to one of the several huts. At the entrance they were met by such a swarm of flies, and a stink so appalling that Ginger clapped a hand over his nose. Into the gloomy interior they were pushed, and two tall, scowling Danakils, took up positions at the entrance.

"Things may not look so bad to you, but they look pretty dim to me," said Ginger, when he could speak.

"They might be worse," replied Biggles evenly, as he lit another cigarette. "After all, we're still alive."

"How long is that pleasant state of affairs going to last?" enquired Ginger without enthusiasm.

"It's hard to say," returned Biggles calmly, blowing smoke into the swarming flies.

"At any moment we may be shot, speared or strangled."

"That's a possibility, I must admit," agreed Biggles.

"But it's significant that the dirty work wasn't put in hand right away.

It might have been. Ambrimos has been to some pains to point out our weaknesses, but he can't see his own. He hesitates."

"That isn't because he's overcharged with the milk of human kindness."

"True enough," conceded Biggles. "If he's overrcharged with anything it's vanity. His real weakness is business—making easy money. It dominates his life. He wants a pilot, and he has the quaint idea that I'm the man. He's had what he wants for so long that he doesn't like taking no for an answer. It may be, of course, that he's a bit scared of going page 158

too far with us. Murder might leak out. One of these natives might give him away. They are all open to bribery; that's why they're here. Ambrimos may forget that a man who can be bribed will usually go to the highest bidder, and when he changes his job he takes all he knows with him. But really, I think Ambrimos is still hoping that I'll change my mind. I hope he goes on hoping. The longer he hopes the better chance we have of doing what we came to do. Now keep quiet for a bit. I want to do a spot of thinking."

"Go ahead," requested Ginger warmly. "Think hard and fast, while the

going's good."

Chapter 13

Zahar Pays A Debt

BERTIE'S errand to Aden occupied about four hours. It was entirely successful and he returned with the three items which he had been asked to fetch. These were, to be specific: a certain bright-eyed member of the R.A.F. officially known as L.A.C. Blakey, classified in the trade of acetylene welder; a parcel of dynamite with detonators and fuses; and a spare Moth wheel that had come from no-one knew where, but had been on the charge of the Station for so long that the Stores Officer was delighted to be rid of it.

For the first item the accommodating Station Commander had been responsible. He had called for a volunteer and Blakey had stepped forward. As he told Bertie confidently when he stepped into the machine, he was willing to go anywhere and do anything to escape even for a short while from the blistering ash-bin named Aden. As Aden lies in the crater of an extinct volcano, this description of it was fully justified. The explosive had proved rather more difficult, as the purpose for which it was required did not, to the Engineer Officer, make sense. There was, he asserted, no water in the desert; alternatively, if there was, why spill it? However, Bertie pleaded urgency, and in the end the production of his police badge got him what he needed. L.A.C. Blakey's enthusiasm for the flight was somewhat damped when,

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asked to carry the parcel on his lap, he was told what it contained.

"Whatever you do laddie, don't drop it on the floor," requested Bertie with unusual earnestness.

"If I drop it anywhere," answered Blakey emphatically, "it will be overboard."

"Quite right—absolutely," agreed Bertie. "Let's tootle along."

The flight back to aerodrome 137 was made without incident. Bertie, bearing in mind what he carried made a careful landing, to find Zahar squatting alone on a mass of fabric which he had removed from the metal members of the old hangar.

"By Jove! You've certainly been busy with the jolly old bodkin," observed Bertie. "Where's the big white chief?"

Bertie's exuberance at the success of his mission suffered a set-back when Zahar explained what had happened. He scratched an ear. "How deuced awkward," he muttered. "What do we do next? "

"The last message of Biggles Sahib was this," answered the Arab without emotion. "The wall that holds the water must be destroyed. If I return not, the task must be done. Biggles Sahib has not returned. I fear his head has been struck off by the Kafirs."

"Do I understand that these toughs didn't know you were here?" questioned Bertie.

"That is the truth, Sahib. God willed otherwise."

"Lucky for you, if you see what I mean. And they didn't see the aeroplane under the canvas? " "No Sahib. The canvas had not then been page 161

removed. We were at work inside when these sons of dogs arrived. It happened that Biggles Sahib had gone outside to breathe, and thus it was that he was seen. He called to me to remain hidden so that I could give you tidings when you came."

Bertie sought inspiration in his eye-glass as he considered the matter.

"We shall have to do something about this," he told Blakey at last. "What I mean is I shall have to do something. What I want you to do is stay here and clear the gubbins away from that aircraft so that we can

get it airborne."

"What about the Moth? " enquired Blakey.

"Yes, by Gad. I'd forgotten that. I'll give you a hand to get the new wheel on. The fellow who owns it may come back for it, so we'll push it out of the way somewhere. He's a nasty piece of work. Quite likely to shoot you. Must be an absolute bounder. He had a crack at me for nothing—

nothing at all. By the way, can you fly an aircraft? "

Blakey started. "What, me? No."

"Never mind. Let's fix the wheel. I thought if you could fly you might navigate the Moth back to Aden instead of hanging about here after you've done your job. It doesn't matter. I'm afraid you'll find it a bit warmish here. As soon as we've got the new wheel on the Moth you can make a start on the hangar. When you've finished, if I'm not here, cover the machine with some of this old canvas in case those wogs come back. Cover yourself up too, if they do, because if they catch you, you've had it."

"What about your machine?" asked Blakey. " Sitting out there in the sun won't do it no good."

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"Quite right. I'll trundle it into this other hangar before I go."

"Go? Go where?"

"Between you and me I don't know yet," admitted Bertie. "It doesn't really matter which way I go. This bally wilderness is all alike. But I shall have to try and find my chief."

"You mean—you're going to start walking about the desert?" Blakey looked horrified.

"Walking? No fear. Not when I can ride. I might as well whisper round in the Moth. Let's get cracking on the undercart. Come on, Zahar, old coffee-berry, you can help."

It did not take the three of them very long to get the damaged wheel off the Moth, and the new one on. After it had been tested, Bertie set Blakey on the real task for which he had been brought out, and then made preparations for departure.

"I don't know how long I shall be away," he told Blakey. "Expect me when you see me—that's the best thing. If you don't see me, don't expect me—if you get what I mean. If those beastly aboriginals happen to totter this way, get out of sight or they may snatch your scalp."

"But half a mo'," requested Blakey. "If you don't come back, how am I to get home?"

"Yes, by Jove, I never thought of that," murmured Bertie. "You'll have to pray that I'll come back. If I don't you'll have to hoof it. Keep travelling east and you're bound to come to the sea sooner or later."

"And then what?"

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"Get someone with a ship to give you a lift," suggested Bertie. He turned to Zahar. "What about you, old chocolate-drop? Are you gomg to stay here or are you coming with me?"

Zahar regarded Bertie dubiously. "Where are we going? "

"We're going to pull the plug out of the Sultan's reservoir and then look for my friends."

"But where are they?"

"How do I know until I've looked?" inquired Bertie plaintively. "They can't be far away. But we'll talk about that when we've let loose the dirty water at El Moab. You can show me the way there for a start." As he spoke, Bertie threw the sack of hashish out of the back seat of the Moth.

"No use humping that stuff around," he observed.

"At El Moab we shall be deprived of our lives," predicted Zahar, with fatalistic calm.

"And who will deprive us?" inquired Bertie.

"The men of Ambrimos. They are worse than the beasts of the desert. They sell their children. This is true, for my eyes have witnessed it—may God forgive them!"

Bertie polished his monocle. "What nasty fellows. Well, we'll blow up their beastly dam and see how they like that. Which reminds me. I mustn't forget the jolly old squibs." He went over to collect the dynamite from where it had been put in a safe place. He picked it up and handed it to Zahar. "Hold that, and hold it tight," he warned. "That is if you've decided to come with me."

"I will come, seeking Abu bin Hamud, who left page 164

me to perish in the desert," declared Zahar. "The blood of Kuatim, who was my friend, calls for vengeance."

"Absolutely," agreed Bertie. "Get aboard, then, and we'll waffle along while there's a drop or two of daylight."

Actually, Bertie knew quite well what he was going to do. In his last message Biggles had ordered the destruction of the dam and it did not occur to him to do anything else. He had a pretty good idea of the locality of, and the distance to, El Moab, for Biggles had told him. He was anxious to get the job done as quickly as possible because, as Biggles had not returned, he felt that he ought to try to find him. So

rather than undertake a long march that would occupy hours of time, he thought he might as well, the Moth being available, fly most of the way.

He would have hesitated to use his own machine for the purpose. The risk of damaging it by landing on unknown ground, as he intended, was too great. This scruple did not arise in the case of the Moth. In view of the behaviour of its pilot he didn't care what happened to it. He felt justified in regarding it as the spoils of war.

With Zahar in the back seat, the dynamite on his lap, he took off and holding the machine low headed straight for his objective. He knew that the higher he flew the greater was the chance of his being seen; apart from that, he had only a comparatively short distance to cover, so he maintained his 'contour chasing' flight until he judged that he must be within a mile or two of El Moab. Then, choosing a level piece
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of ground, he cut his engine, flattened out and landed. It was a bumpy affair because the ground was littered with stones, some of them large ones; but the machine finished on even keel.

"God is great," came the voice of Zahar fervently, from the rear seat.

Bertie stood up and looked around. The sun was now nearing the horizon, turning the sky turquoise, and the sandy wilderness to streaming gold.

The only landmark was a wadi on his left, now a big pool of purple shadows.

"How far are we from the beastly place, old chestnut?" he asked Zahar.

"The distance is small," was the reply. "By walking on our feet, we could reach it by the setting of the sun."

"Good enough," returned Bertie. "Sit still and hang on to your parcel."

He taxied the machine on a little way into a fold in the ground, where

he thought there was less chance of it being seen. He then switched off, climbed down, and took the dynamite from Zahar while the Arab got out.

"Can you find your way to this wall that holds back the water? " he asked.

"Without difficulty," was the comforting reply.

"Then lead on, Macduff, and let us get the business over," said Bertie.

"I will take you a way by which we can reach it without being seen—if that is the will of Allah," promised Zahar. "It is but a short distance farther, and less will be the chance of our being slain by the men of Ambrimos. Afterwards I will seek Hamud,

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and make a hole in him with my dagger through which his life will pass.

Thus will he be held to the reckoning. "

"Here, I say, where did you learn these nasty habits?" enquired Bertie disapprovingly.

"It is the custom of Arabs," answered Zahar. "A life for a life. Thus was it written."

"You mind he doesn't make a hole in you, old coffee-drop," warned Bertie.

"Push along. I'll follow."

Zahar started off like a man who is at home in his surroundings.

A walk of some twenty minutes followed, and ended behind a ridge of

rock and gravel beyond which Bertie could not see. Zahar turned and held a brown hand over his mouth. "This is the place," he whispered. He pointed half left. "That way, in the wadi, is El Moab." He pointed ahead. "Before us is the wall that holds the water."

"Jolly good work, Sambo," complimented Bertie.

"You'd better sit here while I let the water out of the basin."

"This will be a thing to remember," swore Zahar.

"You keep your head down, or a chunk of rock may lull you into forgetfulness," warned Bertie.

Dropping on all fours he crawled to the ridge and looked over. Zahar had been right. There, immediately below him, spanning the wadi, was the primitive reservoir, tapering to a point at the lower end where the dam had been built. He moved his position a trifle to the left so that he could get a clear view of what he intended to destroy, and was pleased page 167

to observe that it was not built on very substantial lines. This was only to be expected, considering the nature of the workmen and the simplicity of their tools. Indeed, Bertie marvelled that the wall stood up at all with such a weight of water behind it .. It was fairly clear that it must have been begun during the dry season, and heightened by the addition of more rocks and stones as the water accumulated behind it. The labour involved in carrying the stones to the spot, and then squaring them roughly by hand, must have been immense. Water was trickling through in several places, as was inevitable considering the quality of the work, but it showed no signs of breaking down.

Beyond the dam the gorge continued, a gloomy cleft in the bed-rock through which the storm-water of untold ages had cut its way. The sides were not precipitous, but steep, and perhaps a hundred feet apart. This continued on below the dam for forty or fifty yards when the gorge made a sharp turn, cutting off the view of what lay beyond. Bertie could only see as far as the turn. He imagined that from this point the gorge began to widen out to form the more shallow wadi, in which, as he understood it, was El Moab, with the desert headquarters

of Ambrimos, and the plantations of narcotic plants which it was the work of the occupants to maintain. He did not trouble to confirm it as his business was confined to the dam. Still, it did occur to him that anyone who happened to be in the bottom of the wadi was likely to have a shock when the pent-up waters were let loose, although to what extent he did not page 168

then realise. Once he listened as he thought he heard the sound of voices; but he was not sure about it as all distant sounds were drowned by the nearer one of water splashing on rock as it trickled through the dam. He hoped that Zahar, in his determination to be revenged on the man who had tried to kill him, had not been so foolish as to show himself.

Rising to his knees he looked around. Not a soul was in sight. The job, after all, looked like being, in R.A.F. slang, a slice of cake.

Not for a moment did it occur to him that Biggles and Ginger might be in El Moab. He was not to know that they were prisoners. There was nothing in Zahar's story to suggest such a thing. Zahar had described precisely what had happened at aerodrome 137; how some natives, apparently friendly, had arrived, saying that they had found a white man, and how Biggles had gone off with them willingly. He was, of course, rather worried about Biggles' failure to return, but he was certainly not seriously alarmed. He imagined him to be in some native camp, doctoring Ginger, who was as yet unfit to travel. Indeed, on this account, he was more worried about Ginger than Biggles. Had he known the truth, that both of them were at that moment within a hundred yards of him, his behaviour would doubtless have been very different from what it was. But he did not know. He was not even thinking of Biggles except in a vague sort of way.

His interest was taken up by the task that had brought him to the place.

Originally he had intended to wait until it was quite dark; but the delay now seemed pointless. Having destroyed the dam

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he would get back to the aerodrome as soon as possible in order to let Biggles know that the job had been done. If it turned out that Biggles

was not at the aerodrome, then he would take steps to find him. Such was his intention.

He again moved his position so that he could study the outside face of the dam, in order to decide before he went down just where he would place the dynamite. He selected a spot almost in the centre, where two large, badly—fitting boulders left a cavity between them. Zahar, apparently unable to restrain his curiosity, had crept nearer, and lay watching; so signalling him to remain where he was Bertie made a precarious descent to the bottom of the gorge, and for the next few minutes busied himself with his task. He soon disposed the dynamite as he had planned. The adjustment of the detonator occupied only a few moments. This done to his satisfaction, he backed away to the limit of the fuse, a matter of a few yards. Having prepared the end with his penknife he laid it on the rock, and humming softly to himself—for it had all been much easier than he had expected—produced a box of matches. All was now ready. He struck a match, but before applying it to the fuse, glanced up to make sure that Zahar was out of the danger area, in case he had not time to reach him before the explosion occurred. He had not bothered to measure the fuse because, as the actual time of the explosion was unimportant, there seemed to be no point in it. As long as it was a 'time' fuse, and not instantaneous—

and the Engineer Officer had assured him of this—that was all that mattered.

He expected to see Zahar watching him. There

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was even a chance that the Arab might have followed him to the bottom of the gorge, for natives are notoriously careless where explosives are concerned. Not seeing him, and wanting to know exactly where he was before he lit the fuse, he called: "Hi! Sambo! Where are you? "

The words acted like a signal. At all events, from that moment the situation switched from one of passive inconsequence to one of brisk action. Things happened, and they happened fast. Nor did the pace slow down for some time.

A man, an Arab, suddenly burst into view, running along the brink of the gorge from the direction of the bend. Naturally, as all Arabs dress alike, Bertie supposed him to be Zahar, who had been scouting and was now hastening to warn him of danger. In any case, against the darkening sky he could only see the figure in silhouette. He only realised his mistake when the figure dropped on one knee and a rifle came into view. Obviously it was not Zahar, for the Arab did not possess a rifle.

Bertie dropped the match he had lighted as the flame burnt his fingers, and jumped for the nearest cover. This was a large rock—the same boulder, in fact, on which he had placed the fuse. A split second later the rifle cracked, and the bullet ricocheted with a shrill whine from the same rock. He crouched lower, not daring to move ; for he heard the bolt click in the breach and knew that the man above was only waiting for him to show his head to fire another shot.

Calling himself hard names for being so foolish as to allow himself to be trapped by sheer carelessness,

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Bertie did some quick thinking. Remain where he was he dared not, for the man above would only have to shift his position to bring him into view.

Yet to expose himself by movement would have the same result. All he could do was to watch the lip of the gorge for the man to appear. When the rifle went up, he decided, before the man could take aim he would jump to a better position in the black shadow of the dam.

Still motionless, watching, he became aware of a brisk hissing noise, just above his head. Turning his eyes upward to ascertain the cause he saw a thin wisp of pale blue smoke rising into the calm air. He knew at once what had happened. The lighted match he had dropped in his startled haste had fallen on the fuse and set it alight. It must already have been burning for the best part of a minute; and the knowledge that the explosion might now occur at any time caused him to move with alacrity, bullets notwithstanding.

As he jumped from cover he looked up. The sharpshooter was still there, but he was no longer alone. There were now two figures, erect and almost motionless, though locked in close embrace. Zahar, apparently, had taken a hand.

Bertie went up the face of the gorge like a mountain goat, taking outrageous chances of breaking his bones as he leapt from ledge to ledge, sending loose stones rattling down behind him. His haste nearly cost him his life, for as he neared the top, one of the figures, he knew not which, came hurtling down to miss him by inches and land with a thud in the bottom of the

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gorge. Had it struck him it must have swept him off his perch.

Panting from his exertions he pulled up and flattened himself against the rock face. If it was Zahar who had gone down it would obviously be suicidal to continue the ascent, for the other man would be waiting to receive him, and with the butt of his rifle knock him on the head before he was in a position to defend himself. Yet the explosion, should it occur now, would have an effect just as fatal. So he was, to mutilate the popular expression, between the devil and the deep blue gorge.

He took the only course open to him. Everything depended on who was at the top, so he took immediate steps to find out. "Hi! Sambo! Is that you up there?" he called.

The reply, to his unspeakable relief, came in Zahar's voice. "O Sahib of the glass eye, it is me. Why do you wait?"

Bertie wasted no time explaining why he was waiting.

He scrambled over the top without any regard for dignity, and, breathless, found Zahar in the act of cleaning his dagger in the sand.

"What have you been doing with that thing? " he demanded.

Zahar sheathed the weapon. "Good tidings," he reported calmly. "That Arab was Abu bin Hamud. He would have slain you, but Allah—may he be glorified—delivered him into my hands to be punished for his sins. It was written."

"What brought him here, I wonder?" muttered Bertie, brushing dust from his clothes.

Zahar turned wondering eyes to Bertie's face.

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"God is the knower," quoth he. "Doubtless it was His will." Obviously as far as Zahar was concerned there was nothing more to be said.

Bertie had nothing more to say about it either. He turned a puzzled face in the direction of the wadi as from it there came a great noise of shouting. "I wonder what that's all about," he murmured. "Something seems to be going on. Let's go and have a dekko. I mean, if some lads are having a frolic in the wadi, we'd better warn them to get out of it before they get their feet wet—if you see what I mean."

Zahar looked at him sadly. "Why should we throwaway our lives to save this misbegotten spawn of dogs and hyenas? " he protested.

" Ah! there you've got me, Sambo," answered Bertie lightly. "It's a way we have—very silly and all that. But let's have a look, anyway."

He set off along the rim of the gorge towards a babble of voices which now came plainly to their ears.

Chapter 14

Ambrimos Gets His Answer

FOR Biggles and Ginger, in their insalubrious prison quarters, the day

passed slowly. For Ginger, still feeling the effects of the drug, it was a nightmare of heat, noise, flies, and the overpowering stench of filth.

What Biggles thought about it all was a secret he kept to himself. He rarely spoke, but sat for the most part deep in thought, smoking cigarette after cigarette with the object, as he said, of keeping the flies at a distance and off—setting to a certain extent the disgusting stink.

One thing was to Ginger quite evident, however.

Whatever Biggles was planning it was not escape. That was out of the question, for, apart from the sentries, every native in the camp had foregathered at the spot as if in anticipation of an unusual entertainment. The mob surrounded the hut, talking, shouting and gesticulating, in a state of high excitement. To get through such a barrier, even if Biggles and Ginger had possessed automatic weapons, would have been impossible. There was, as Biggles once remarked just nothing they could do about it.

Towards evening, a caravan comprising men women and children—presumably the slave part~ formed up, and with its beasts of burden filed away towards the east, in the direction of the Red Sea.

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This was one of the occasions on which Biggles had something to say. "So Ambrimos is in that racket, too. What a skunk the fellow must be.

Anything for money."

"They have at least taken some of the flies with them," observed Ginger morosely. "I didn't know there were so many flies in the world."

"Where there's dirt, you'll always find flies," answered Biggles tritely.

"The dirtiest fly of the lot is Ambrimos. He's half-way to becoming a maggot. Someone should have put a heel on him long ago. Unfortunately, his sort are not rare in the world of today."

Silence fell.

Some time later Ginger said: "I wonder what Bertie's up to?"

Biggles flicked the ash off his cigarette. "Probably waiting for us at the aerodrome."

"He may decide to look for us and drift along this way."

"Why should he come here? He doesn't know we're here. Zahar didn't know where I was bound for so he couldn't tell him. If he did come, he'd only get his block knocked off anyway. He could do nothing against this crowd."

"Do you mean you're just going to sit here and wait for Ambrimos to bump us off when it suits him? "

"Can you think of any way of preventing it? I can't. If we went outside those savages would simply make pincushions of us. Judging from their behaviour they'd ask for nothing more."

Another silence.

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"I landed you in this mess," remarked Ginger miserably.

"Don't talk nonsense," answered Biggles shortly. "We came here together.

We knew the risks. Things happened to go wrong, that's all. When things go wrong, to start talking about whose fault it was gets you nowhere.

We'll just have to take what's coming. If I can grab a spear from one of these toughs and stick it into Ambrimos I shall be satisfied that we've done a good job, whatever happens afterwards. We can rely on Bertie

to knock a hole in the dam."

The day wore on. The sun sank below the rim of the wadi, which at once began to fill with shadows. The babble outside increased rather than diminished.

Suddenly a hush fell.

"Now what?" muttered Ginger expectantly.

"I'd say it's Ambrimos, coming to gloat," returned Biggles.

He was right. The crowd of wild-eyed, mop-haired natives, parted, and the Sultan appeared at the door of the hut. He called to Biggles and Ginger to come out.

They obeyed. "You were wise to stay outside," Biggles told him. "The smell inside was quite bad enough."

"I'm sorry, but it was the only shady place I had to offer," purred Ambrimos, missing the sting in Biggles's remark. "Have you thought about my proposition?"

"There was nothing to think about," Biggles told him.

Ambrimos sighed. "You know the alternative?"

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"You told us. There's no need to make a song about it."

"Very well, upon your own heads be it," came back Ambrimos, his voice hardening. "Perhaps you think I'm not serious?"

"Why should I think anything of the sort?"

"Perhaps you are right. Why indeed? You have meddled in my affairs and this is what happens to people who do that."

"One day you'll learn what happens to people who do what you're thinking of doing," answered Biggles.

Ambrimos smiled. "Not here," he said softly.

"The arm of you British may be long, but it does not reach as far as this."

"Don't fool yourself," Biggles told him grimly. "It can reach as far as you're ever likely to get."

The Sultan frowned. "So even now you dare to threaten me? Very well.

Stiff-necks, they call you British. I can at least find a way to loosen yours." He made a signal to the waiting crowd and stepped back.

Some of the natives, silent now, at once closed in.

Biggles and Ginger were each held firmly by half-dozen hands. A lane was made through the throng as the party moved forward.

Ginger soon saw what Ambrimos intended. The man had spoken literally. In the middle of the wadi stood an ancient fig tree with many branches that spread out at right—angles from the trunk. From one of these, two ropes, each with a noose at the end, hung side by side. Below these a rough plank had

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been placed across two packing cases. He drew a deep breath. "Looks as if we'd had it this time," he said softly.

Biggles did not answer.

In a curious sort of anticipatory silence the prisoners were led to the tree. Nearby two men sat on a stone, smoking cigarettes, watching the scene. One was the Sultan's manager, and the other, from Bertie's description of him, the Moth pilot.

"You will excuse me if my methods seem a little old-fashioned," mocked Ambrimos in a silky voice. "But it is not often that my men get a treat of this sort. They are anxious to make the most of it and I feel that I must oblige them. In the same way, I feel that I'm being generous in employing your own national method of disposing of people who have become a menace to others. Were I not here to keep order the manner of your departure from this world would, I fear, be more prolonged and more painful. Bearing that in mind, will you be so obliging as to mount the plank? "

Ginger was thinking desperately. Of all the perilous positions they had ever been in, this was the most hopeless. All along he had hoped that Biggles would do something, but now, looking around at the brutish faces that surrounded them, he realised that there was nothing that he could do. There was no hope of escape, or of rescue. Even if by some remote chance Bertie and Zahar had managed to track them, and arrived on the scene, what could they do against such a mob? They would simply perish in a futile attempt at rescue. And the nearest military camp was many page 179

miles away on the other side of the Red Sea, so no aid could be expected from that quarter. For the first time in his life Ginger abandoned hope.

In the crimson glow of the setting sun he mounted the plank on which Biggles had already climbed, and from this elevated position gazed down at a sea of hostile faces. He looked at Biggles, quite sure that it was for the last time.

Biggles smiled a curious apologetic smile. "So long, laddie," he said.

"Sorry I brought you into this. We've had a long run and I suppose it had to happen sometime."

A hush fell over the scene as a giant Sudanese climbed on to the plank with the apparent object of adjusting the ropes. He was reaching for the nearest when, from no great distance away, there came the crack of a rifle shot.

All heads turned in the direction of the sound.

There was some muttering. Ambrimos spoke swiftly to his manager, who got up and began walking along the wadi towards the place where it narrowed into a gorge. Who had fired the shot and for what purpose, Ginger wondered? The Sudanese was staring up the gorge, too, his attention, like the rest, distracted for the moment. Ginger saw Biggles edging slowly towards the heavy knife that the man carried in his belt; but before the movement was completed, through, the sultry air there came a hail.

"Hi!" shouted a voice. "What's going on down there?"

Ginger's eyes switched to the top of the wadi, and he was seized by an insane desire to laugh when he

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saw Bertie standing there, clear against the sky, in the act of adjusting his eye-glass. Zahar was with him.

"Mad as a hatter," he heard Biggles mutter.

"What are you chaps doing?" called Bertie. "They're hanging us," yelled Ginger, who thought

it was time that Bertie knew the truth.

"Are they, by Jove," came back from Bertie. He pointed a threatening finger. "Ambrimos! Stop that, you infernal scamp!" He started scrambling down the sandy bank of the wadi.

"Crazy," murmured Biggles simply.

Ginger's eyes were not the only ones that had switched to the cause of the interruption. Every head had turned. A swelling mutter of astonished voices arose from the crowd, and those who were nearest started to run towards the intruder, with the clear object of seizing him. And in this they must have succeeded, in spite of the fact that Bertie drew his pistol and opened a brisk fire, had there not come at this juncture a further interruption, one more startling than the first.

Biggles had just snatched the knife from the Sudanese, and kicked him off the plank, when from somewhere close, though out of sight, came a tremendous explosion that soon marked its position by sending into the air a cloud of smoke, sand and rocks. Following closely upon it, before the reverberations had died away, came a low roar as if of distant thunder. An instant later there swept into sight a wall of water, a wave nearly twenty feet high that curled over at the top in a never-falling swirl of yellow foam.

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For perhaps two seconds no one moved. Then a wild yell went up as every man in the wadi perceived his danger and fled for safety. It was obvious that none could reach it, for the water was travelling at the speed of a train, sinking a little as it filled the wadi from side to side.

Ginger stood still, his brain reeling from shock. In a detached sort of way he saw Biggles fling the knife at Ambrimos, who was running with the rest. Then, turning, Biggles shouted: "The rope! Quick! Up the rope!"

Ginger recovered his senses with a rush. He realised what Biggles meant.

Grabbing the rope which was to have taken his life, but was now the only means of saving it, he went up it hand over hand. He was only just in time. As it was he had to lift his legs as the crest of the wave clutched at them, and whirled away the support on which a moment before he had stood. Gasping, he managed to get a hand over the branch to which the rope had been tied. Another second and he sat astride it, staring in a dazed sort of way at a swirling yellow flood that raced below. He gazed around. The only persons in sight that he could

see were Bertie and Zahar, who, being safely above the flood, had sat down to watch. What had become of the crowd needed no effort of imagination to work out. Every man and everything else in the wadi except the tree, had been swept away by the raging waters which still filled the wadi although most of its early force had been spent.

"There was more water in that reservoir than I page 182

thought," came from Biggles, who had adopted the same posture as Ginger a couple of yards away.

Ginger looked at him somewhat blankly. He was still suffering from shock, and a curious sense of unreality at this almost miraculous escape when all seemed lost. Not knowing what to say he said nothing.

Biggles lit a cigarette. "Nice work !" he called to Bertie.

Bertie raised his hat in acknowledgment.

"He certainly made a beautiful mess," remarked Ginger, finding his voice and gazing at the devastation around him.

"He'll never make a better one, or one better-timed," replied Biggles with conviction.

"What's the drill now?" asked Ginger. "If any of these Wogs are left alive they'll be really angry."

"I'd say most of them, if they're still alive, have something else to think about than what we're doing," answered Biggles. "I don't suppose any of them could swim-not that swimming would help them if they could."

We shall have to stay where we are until the water subsides, anyway."

This took about ten minutes, by which time it was nearly dark. Bertie ascertained that it was safe for them to descend by wading out

through a few inches of mud and puddles.

"All right, you lads, you can stop playing monkeys," he informed them.

"I say, what a beastly mess! Look at my feet—my only decent pair of shoes, too. Disgusting!"

Biggles dropped into the mire.

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"I suggest we get out of this while the going's good," said Ginger, as he dropped with a splash beside him.

"I don't think we've much to worry about now," returned Biggles. "In any case, I'm not going until I've seen how much damage has been done—I mean, to the gurra plantation in particular. By the way, Bertie, how did you get here so quickly? Did you know we were here?"

"I hadn't an idea of it," stated Bertie. "You told Zahar to tell me to blow up the dam. So I pushed it over. I was going to look for you afterwards. By Jove! Did my eyes pop out when I saw you standing on that beastly plank? Shook me to the wick, I can tell you."

"Did you walk here?"

"No bally fear. I aviated hither in the Moth, at a maximum altitude of about six inches."

"Where is it now?"

"A mile or so back. Zahar will remember the place—I hope."

They walked together out of the mud and silt left by the flood to the dry bank of the wadi, up which they climbed without meeting anyone

or hearing a sound to suggest that anybody was left in El Moab. From the top there was just enough light left to enable them to survey the scene.

The deluge had done even more damage than Ginger had supposed. In its first tremendous rush it must have carried everything before it, for the floor of the wadi had been practically swept clean. Not a building was left standing. All that remained of the huts was a quantity of planks and splintered wood

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scattered along the course of the flood. To add to the ruin, in places the water had evidently undermined the banks of the wadi, the sudden erosion causing landslides that had buried wreckage, and probably bodies, under masses of sand and shingle.

It was clear that the plantation could not have escaped; but Biggles was determined to make sure. He asked the others to wait while he went down to examine the area where the gurra had been under cultivation. He was soon back. "Either the plants have been washed clean out of the ground~

or else they are buried under tons of silt," he reported. "At any rate, I couldn't find any sign of them."

What had become of Ambrimos and his mob was in some doubt. Biggles took the view that everyone in the wadi, excluding themselves, must have been carried away, possibly for miles, before being deposited, dead or alive—

probably dead. There was no time to find out. Darkness had now closed in, so anything like a real search was out of the question. As there was nothing more they could do Biggles decided to get back to the aerodrome as quickly as possible. They were all in need of food and rest.

"I say, old boy, that poor old, Moth won't carry the four of us," Bertie pointed out, as they set off for the place where it had been left.

"It will, if we don't try to get it off the floor," argued Biggles.

" You mean, you're going to taxi all the way home? "

"Why not? The chap who owned the machine won't be needing it for a long time, I imagine. Riding is better than walking, isn't it?"

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"Absolutely, old boy, absolutely," agreed Bertie warmly.

And so, an hour later, the wild creatures of the desert saw the strange spectacle of an aircraft bumping across the moonlit wilderness with two figures sitting side by side on the centre—section, one of them an Arab whose gumbez fluttered like a victory flag in the slipstream of the airscrew.

From the back seat came the sound of Bertie's voice, uplifted in a song about a bicycle made for two.

THE party arrived back at aerodrome 137 at about midnight, to find L.A.C.

Blakey sitting very bored, and more than a trifle peeved, on the sack of hashish near the ruins of the hangar on which he had been working. He received the occupants of the Moth with mixed expressions of relief and disapproval.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "It's been no joke sitting here half the night with wild beasts howling about the place."

Biggles laughed. "It was only a jackal or a hyena, I imagine," he said consolingly. "It wouldn't hurt you."

"Whatever they were I don't like 'em," declared the airman. "What have you all been up to? Left me stuck 'ere with no grub and no water

while you joy-ride about this perishing no-man's-land, four up in a Moth. You won't have done that machine no good."

"Doesn't matter—it isn't ours," answered Biggles lightly. "How did the job go?"

"Oh that-nothing to it. I had it all buttoned up in a couple of hours."

"We can get the machine out? "

"Start her up and she'll fly away."

"She doesn't appear to be damaged?"

"Looks all right to me."

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"That's fine! Sorry we had to leave you alone for a bit, but we had work to do. I'll recommend you for a spot of leave when I get back. Meanwhile we could all do with a bite of something to eat." Biggles went to the locker of the now free aircraft and came back with some tins of bully and sardines, biscuits and a bottle of water. "We shall have to make the best of this for the time being," he announced. "Help yourselves."

The airman produced his jack knife and removed the lids of the tins with a dexterity born of experience. "How long are we staying here?" he wanted to know. "Only till it gets light," Biggles told him. "Anybody who wants to sleep can go ahead. I'm not tired, so I'll mount guard."

The night passed without alarm, and at the first streak of dawn Biggles had everyone on the move.

"What are we going to do with the Moth?" asked Ginger.

"Leave it where it is," answered Biggles. "We'll take the hashish with us, though. "We'll dump it at Aden and let the Narcotics Bureau know about it. If they want the Moth, they can fetch it. It may have been the property of Ambrimos, or it may not. We don't want someone to send us a bill for a stolen aircraft. No doubt the authorities will be able to trace ownership, and find out the name of the fellow who was flying it."

Biggles's machine was taxied out of the hangar in which it had been imprisoned, and after it had been examined for possible damage Biggles divided the party between the two aircraft now available. He
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took Ginger and Zahar with him. Bertie took Blakey. The bag of hashish was put into Biggles's machine and after the Moth had been wheeled into the one more or less serviceable hangar, the two aircraft left the ground together.

Biggles did not fly straight back to Aden. Keeping low he made a detour that took him over El Moab—or what remained of it. This was not very much. As Ginger observed, the place looked like a battlefield. The area that had been under cultivation appeared to be washed clean to the bedrock. It seemed that there were some survivors after all. At any rate, a number of natives were seen in the vicinity, some rounding up stray animals and others delving amongst the ruins, although to what purpose was not clear. Zahar said they were searching for loot before returning to their homes, which was probably true. As he remarked, there was no longer any reason for them to remain at El Moab. Anyway, the fight had gone out of them, for on the arrival of the aircraft most of them sought cover or tried to hide.

"I don't think they'll trouble anyone for some time," observed Biggles, as he turned away and took up a course for Aden. "I'd like to know what happened to Ambrimos. He was the real villain of the piece. That man was dangerous. The trouble with his sort is, they are not content with making money. Having got it, it goes to their heads, and they start getting big ideas about how the world should be run. Ambrimos was a fool. He'd made his pile. Had he the wit to go straight, as I suggested to him, he could have slept on velvet for the rest of his days.

Instead of which it rather looks as if he's going to sleep for a long time in the sand. If he is still alive I don't think he'll dare to show his face in Aden again, or anywhere else in the Middle East, knowing that I shall have a few things to say about him in my report. That means he's lost his business and everything else, even if he hasn't lost his life.

It was sheer greed that tripped him up. He wasn't content simply to sell gurra. He wanted a monopoly of it and committed murder to get it."

"There is no God but God," put in Zahar, who was listening.

"We'll see about getting back home right away to set the Air Commodore's mind at rest," concluded Biggles.

The return flight to Aden was merely a matter of routine, and as Biggles was anxious to make a verbal report of the affair to Air Commodore Raymond, he stayed only as long as was necessary to fulfil certain obligations. Immediately on landing, Zahar was suitably rewarded for his services with a sum of money that brought a smile to his taciturn face. .

"Wallah! God is great," he cried. "May he be glorified! and long may you live, Sahib! With this money I shall buy a she-camel and her offspring will make me rich."

"As long as she makes you happy, it doesn't matter about the riches,"

Biggles told him smiling. "Play fair and fight fair from now on, remembering that for your part in avenging the death of Kuatim your name will be spoken with honour in every menzil from Mosul to Muscat."

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As a matter of detail, later on, in view of the recommendation

contained in Biggles's report, he was taken into Government service and with a caravan of camels now supplies the needs of outlying airstrips in Southern Arabia.

After a bath, a square meal and a rest, Biggles went down to see Norman, to thank him for his assistance and to tell him in confidence what had happened in the desert. Then, having thanked the Station Commander for his helpful cooperation, and fulfilled his promise to recommend L.A.C.

Blakey for leave, he started on the first leg of the journey back to London.

This again was merely a matter of routine and in due course the two Proctors touched down on their own airfield. Within an hour Air Commodore Raymond was listening with no small astonishment to the tale that Biggles had to tell.

Some weeks later, when the affair was half-forgotten, Biggles was reminded of it when he received a letter from Captain Norman, in which was narrated the local, unofficial version of the incident. He opened it in his office and read it aloud to the others—including Algy, who, by this time, had got over his chagrin at being left out of the adventure.

Rumours of what had happened, said Norman, were now trickling through from the other side of the Red Sea, but no one seemed to be quite sure of the facts, as Ambrimos and his native assistants had disappeared. One thing seemed certain, however. Nicolo Ambrimos, known up and down the Red Sea as the Sultan, dealer in frankincense, dates, and other less commendable commodities, had ended his career

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at El Moab, either by drowning or by suffocation under the collapsing walls of the wadi. At all events, he had not returned to Aden, nor had he been seen at any other ports from which he conducted his questionable enterprises. Of his native helpers who had survived, none seemed to know what had caused the explosion.

At this point, Bertie, polishing his monocle, remarked: "As the worthy Zahar would say, it must have been the will of God."

Biggles nodded. "Only a fool would dispute that," he said softly.

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